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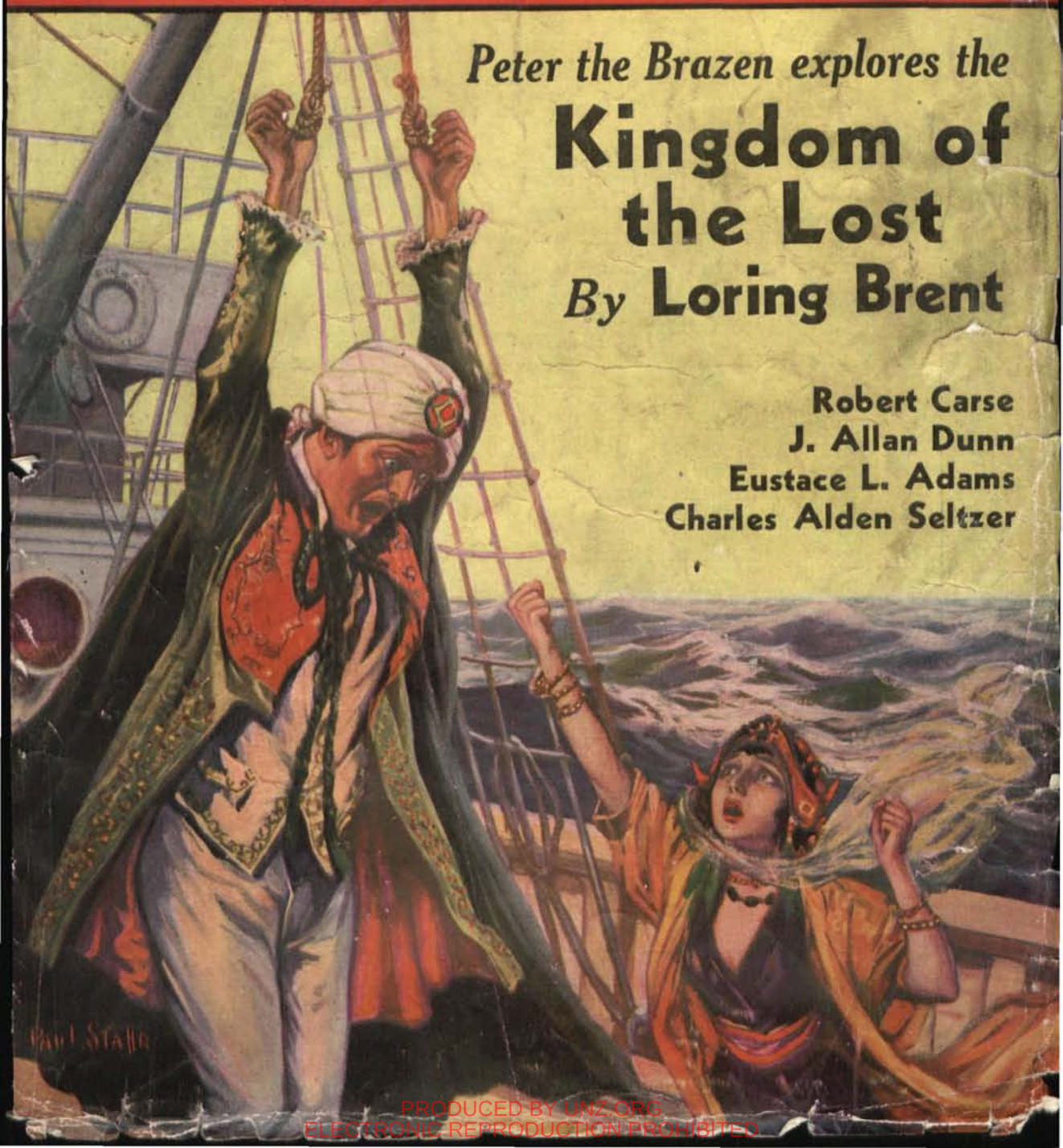

Peter the Brazen explores the

Kingdom of the Lost

By **Loring Brent**

Robert Carse
J. Allan Dunn
Eustace L. Adams
Charles Alden Seltzer

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Action Stories of Every Variety

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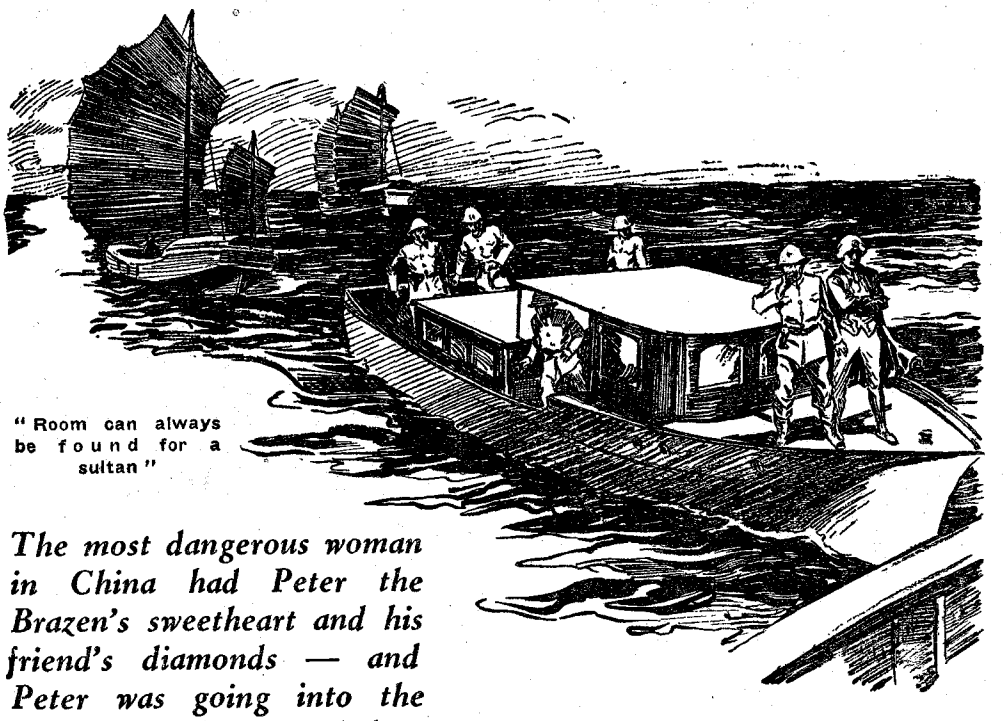

"Room can always be found for a sultan"

The most dangerous woman in China had Peter the Brazen's sweetheart and his friend's diamonds — and Peter was going into the Jaws of Hell to get them

Kingdom of the Lost

By LORING BRENT

Author of "The Octopus of Hongkong," "Valley of Missing Men," etc.

CHAPTER I.

ORDERED TO LEAVE.

SOUTH and east of Hainan it lies —that mystic reach of the South China Sea known to the mariners of all nations as the Jaws of Hell. The actual location of the Jaws of Hell has always been a matter of conjecture—and heated controversy. But it is agreed that the Jaws of Hell are somewhere south and east of Hainan, somewhere north of the most dangerous reef in the world—the Paracels—and offshore from that vague and mysterious borderland where China ends and French Indo-China begins.

The Paracels Reef runs northerly and southerly, and it resembles the broken backbone of an incredible monster of the sea. Stout ships, both in canvas and in steam, have broken their own backs on these barnacled vertebræ which lurk beneath the surface for hundreds of miles.

Even to-day, with all modern aids to navigation, ships avoid these fog-bound, reef-studded waters when they can, and those that must venture into them do so with great caution.

With the passage of centuries, a terrifying legend grew and took hold of the imagination of sailing men; for neither the submerged black rocks, nor

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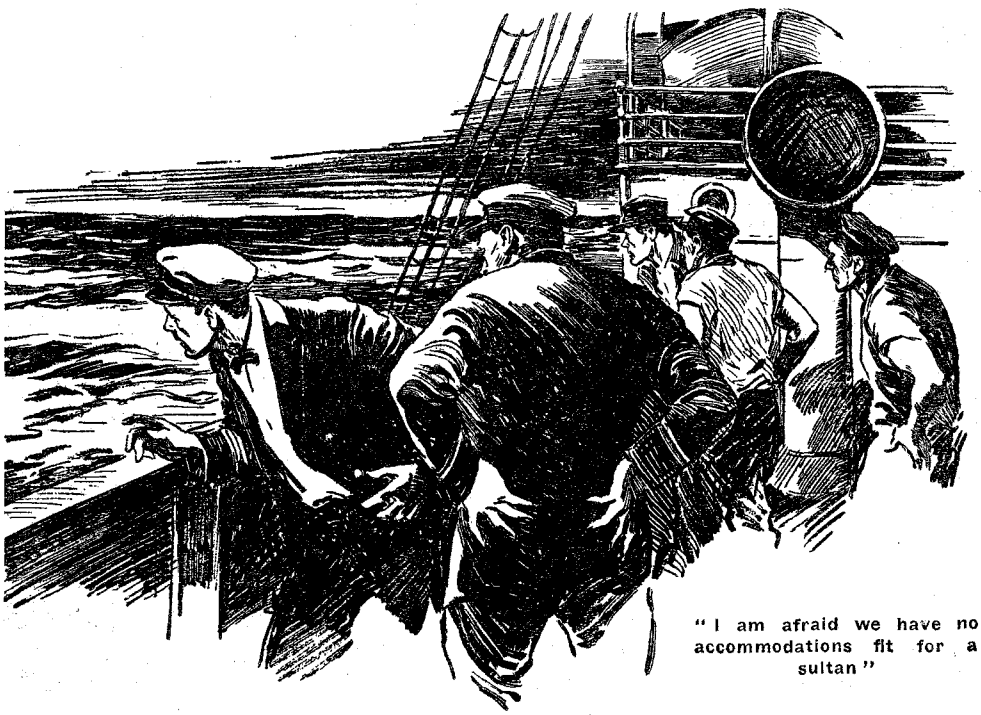

"I am afraid we have no accommodations fit for a sultan"

the heavy fogs prevalent so many months of the year, nor the swift and treacherous currents set up by tides and winds—none of these natural hazards could quite account for the mysterious disappearance, with all hands, of so many ships.

According to this legend, there is a hole in the ocean somewhere north of the Paracels—a monstrous, silent and irresistible whirlpool. And it is this hole in the ocean that is called the Jaws of Hell. Any ship straying into the outer eddying of this wicked whirl is drawn into the center and sucked down, and the ship and its men are scattered about in the gray ooze of unsounded depths.

The legend was scouted by hard-headed shipmasters. They declared that, despite the sweep of the currents in the South China Sea, such a whirlpool at such a spot would be contrary to natural laws. Yet the most hard-headed of shipmasters could not explain why, over the centuries, so many ships entered that treacherous area and vanished without trace.

It remained for an American adventurer to solve a mystery which had plagued the mariners of all nations for upwards of five centuries.

THE tall young man in Room 712 of the Colonial Hotel, in Hongkong, was making last-minute preparations for departure. His two Gladstone bags were packed and ready to be closed and buckled.

The time was four minutes of two in the morning. He had a little more than two hours in which to check out of the hotel and board the little coastwise steamer which would take him—if all went well—to Soerabaya, Java. He did not believe that all would go well, for he knew that the adventure on which he was embarking was ex-

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tremely hazardous. He was preparing with meticulous care to meet trouble halfway, if trouble intruded itself.

With bags packed, he was now examining the .38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver which had proved an able and trustworthy friend. The gun was loaded, but even that certainty did not satisfy him. Breaking it, he removed one of the shells. With a pocket knife he pried away shell brass from lead, and extracted the bullet. He decanted the powder upon a folded, thick envelope. To the little dark pile he touched a lighted match. The powder puffed into a bright gold bud of flame which hissed and instantly expired.

But the young man was not yet satisfied. He removed the other cartridges from the revolver and inserted the despoiled shell. He snapped the cylinder into place, and pulled the trigger until a brisk pop convinced him that the cap was good. Reassured now that nothing had been tampered with, he returned the other cartridges to the cylinder and dropped the revolver into his hip pocket.

He went to the dresser and picked up from it a small black metal box. In shape and appearance it resembled a small folding camera—the size that slips easily into a coat pocket. It was a compact pocket radio receiver—a device on which he had been working in his spare time for months. Actually, it represented years of resarch.

Until quite recently a research engineer on the staff of the General Electric Company, this young man, with a passion for radio, had dreamed of an efficient, portable radio receiver, and in this device he had transmuted his dreams into reality. It contained several interesting features: tiny amplifying tubes of great ruggedness; a unique battery of great power, light weight and exceedingly long life; and a speaker, of the power type, which was as precise as a Swiss watch and remarkable not only in its clearness and range but in its volume.

This tiny pocket receiver would, if you wished, produce sounds of a magnitude sufficient to shatter an eardrum. It required no aërial or ground connection.

He touched the dials. The high, sweet piping of ships at sea filled the bedroom. He twisted the wavelength dial. At first faintly, then with greater volume, the strains of a dance orchestra, clear, full and resonant, surged from the tiny mouth of the receiver. Chicago—eleven thousand miles away! There was a thrill for you!

His bedside telephone rang sharply. He switched off his radio and considered that other useful electrical instrument with a faint frown. He picked up the receiver, put it to his ear and listened.

A man's low voice panted, "Pete?"

"Yes."

"Come up. Chop-chop! Trouble!"

The young man replaced the telephone receiver. As he did so, knuckles rapped sharply at his door.

HE picked up the radio receiver, placed it in his coat pocket, and opened the door. Three men of varying heights and ages stood in a row in the hall, all looking at him with hard, unfriendly eyes. He recognized two of them.

The tallest and oldest of the trio said, in a harsh voice, "You're Peter Moore, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"We're from the American consulate," the tall man said. "We hear you're leaving China."

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Wondering just what they had heard, Moore answered, "That's right. My ship sails at noon."

"For San Francisco?"

Moore nodded. "Do you want to see my ticket?"

The shorter, younger man gave a grunt. "We know all about your ticket. You had two tickets. You were going to marry a girl, and she gave you the run-around. Her name is Susan O'Gilvie. Where is she?"

"I don't know."

The three men stared at him suspiciously, and the short one said, "Where's her ticket?"

"Right here. She isn't going to use it."

The tall, thin man was squinting at him now. "Are you sure about that?"

Peter Moore smiled briefly. "I'm taking her word for it."

"And you're sailing alone?"

"Do you doubt my word?"

"That's about the size of it," the short, stocky man answered bluntly. "There's a lot of ships clearing from Hongkong between now and noon. We just wanted to make sure you're taking the one that goes to Frisco."

"There's been too much going on in this town to-night," the third man said, speaking for the first time. He had rusty brown hair and small green eyes. "There was a lot of trouble up on the Peak. There was a house busted into by a gang of American tars. What do you know about it?"

"Nothing."

"What do you know about an American girl named Marcia Pool who got kidnaped to-night?"

"Nothing."

"What do you know about a Eurasian woman by the name of Lotus Burma? They call her the Octopus."

Peter Moore gently shook his head. His three visitors stared at him without friendliness.

"This guy," said the short man peevishly, "never knows anything about anything. Where is the Octopus now?"

Peter Moore shrugged with an air of regret.

The tall man, glaring coldly at him, said, "Every time you hit this town, we're busy for the next month, trying to patch things up. We've got a message for you from the Consul General. It's this: take that ship to Frisco at noon—and don't take any other ship. And don't bother about coming back."

Peter Moore lighted a cigarette calmly. "Give my respects to the Consul General," he said softly, "and tell him that I will always treat his slightest whim as a command. Good night, gentlemen."

He closed the door upon them, but his feelings were not so light-hearted as his voice had sounded. Always, it seemed, at a crucial moment, when plans were ripe, some officious official interfered. This meant he would be watched. It meant that his quiet departure for Java might be hindered.

WHEN he was sure that his callers were gone, he closed his bags, picked them up, opened the door, and ran to the stairs, wondering if Dan de Sylva had had previous information of the American Consul General's interest in his activities.

It was not unlikely. Dan de Sylva's espionage system was as intricate, as far-reaching, as that of a nation at war. He was a gem dealer—the brains, in fact, of the powerful and somewhat mysterious De Sylva Corporation. He and his agents in the Far East col-

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lected rare gems and jewels, and sold them to European and American clients at outrageous profits. In a world of thieves and murderers, Daniel de Sylva lived a dangerous and exotic life.

He opened the door to Moore's knock—a tall, dark, thin man of forty; a red-haired man with the sharp, angular features, the V-shaped smile, the cynical dark eyes of Satan. His hair was of a dusky shade of red—it resembled the play of fire in smoke.

He pulled Peter Moore into the room and swiftly, silently shut the door. His dark, thin face was flushed and his eyes had an excited glitter.

"Did you know," he said breathlessly, "that Susan O'Gilvie will be on that ship?"

Moore placed his bags on the floor against the wall. "What of it?"

"What of it!" his satanic friend cried. "She'll ruin everything! She always ruins everything!"

"She won't ruin this," Moore said firmly. "Forget her."

"What's more," the gem dealer went on, "they're wise."

Moore nodded. "I just had a visit."

"What happened?"

"Three of them dropped around. They told me to be on board the King of Asia when she sails at noon—or else."

De Sylva stared at him. "Who said this?"

"The Consul General sent the message. It took three of them to deliver it."

"Now?"

"They just left."

Satan wagged his head. "This is getting too complicated. I'm not talking about the Consul General. I'm talking about Lotus Burma. One of my agents took her aboard the Langpo—a sampan boy—and just reported to me. She suspects you'll be aboard that ship. She told Miss O'Gilvie she believed you'd be aboard."

"I expected it," Moore said quietly. "Stop worrying."

"But what'll you do if she catches you?"

"She won't catch me."

But Daniel de Sylva was not reassured. He was nervous and irritable—a prey to a thousand worries.

"I don't think you realize the danger of this job. Are you bearing in mind that Lotus Burma has in her possession two million dollars' worth of diamonds belonging to my company? Are you bearing in mind that she got those diamonds by torturing to death one of my most valued men?"

Moore smiled faintly. "Yes, Dan." His blue eyes were clear and tranquil. If he was nervous, if he was apprehensive, he did not betray it.

SATAN stared at him and cried, "How can you be so damned calm?" Distracted, he began pacing up and down the room.

"Oh, I know how clever you are," he said. "I know how reckless you are. I know you've slid out of a thousand tight jams. I know you're the only man in China capable of handling this job. I grant all that."

"Then why are you having this nervous breakdown?"

"I'll tell you why!" De Sylva snapped. "A man can't mix romance with this kind of job!"

"It isn't romance. I am responsible for Susan O'Gilvie. My responsibility won't end until I get her out of this country—and back to America."

"Are you telling me you aren't in love with her?"

Moore's blue eyes hardened. "Yes."

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"You're a liar! You're crazy about her! You'd follow her through hell! You aren't interested in getting back my diamonds—you're only going on that ship to be near her! My God! You were going to marry her this morning and sail for Frisco at noon on your honeymoon—and you say you don't love her!"

A little wearily, Peter Moore said, "Aw, stop worrying, Dan."

"That little thrill hunter!" the gem dealer muttered, as if he had not heard. "She's almost cost you your life a dozen times already. She isn't happy if she isn't in a jam. But you'll never get her out of this. No woman alive can beat the combination of that purple drug—and Lotus Burma. Lotus Burma will never let go of her. And you'll lose my diamonds, and you'll lose your life if you mix that girl into this! You're trying to ride two horses!"

"I have to go," Moore said quietly.

"Wait a minute! You apparently don't know what this means to me. Nobody knows. Those diamonds were not insured. If I don't recover them—I'm lost. The De Sylva Corporation is lost! I'll be ruined and I'll be disgraced!"

"I'll get the diamonds. But I'll need a decoy—a bait. I want some of the finest diamonds, sapphires, emeralds and rubies you have."

Satan stared at him a moment longer—a harassed and distracted Satan. Then, unquestioningly, he went to a large square black trunk against the wall. He unlocked it and raised the lid.

He lifted out a tray and brought out a small black leather case. This he opened—and it was as if he had unlocked the source of the rainbow.

In narrow compartments of black velvet, gems blazed forth in spectacular, colorful brilliance. There was the frosty white of diamonds, the blood-red of rubies, the sea-blue of sapphires, the reptilian green of emeralds.

Peter Moore did not pause to marvel over this amazing hoard. Swiftly, he began collecting the largest stones in each compartment. He selected three diamonds the size of marbles; an emerald in the shape of a cube as clear as crème de menthe; four rubies of various sizes and cuts, and two cabochon sapphires large and blue.

Dan de Sylva gave a grunt. "You've helped yourself to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of stones—at wholesale prices," he said huskily.

"They'll do nicely," Moore said, and dropped the lot carelessly into a pants pocket.

"You've got one more item I'll need—the elephant ring you bought from the Sultan of Sakara."

The gem dealer stiffened.

"Who told you I had that ring?" he asked harshly.

"The same man who told me the sultan had been confined to an insane asylum in Singapore."

"But no one knows that!" De Sylva cried. "No one but I and one man in the British secret service knows that the Sultan of Sakara is insane!"

"Perhaps that's why I want the sultan's ring."

WITH a mystified air, Satan produced the famous elephant ring once owned by that eccentric and amazing Oriental potentate, His Majesty Ameer Prak Chan, the Sultan of Sakara. It was in another black box, and it was a strange and astonishing jewel.

It was of purest gold, this elephant head, so large that it covered all of a man's middle finger from the hand to

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the knuckle. It was held in place not only by the gold band but by the trunk, which, curiously, was shaped so that it appeared to wind round and round the wearer's finger. The eyes were emerald, the tusks were little shafts of pure diamond. And in the forehead was set a perfect sample of that venerated and talismanic stone—a star sapphire. The elephant's face, delicately carved, was whimsical. Here, one might say, was an elephant with a sense of humor. The green eyes seemed to twinkle; the mouth seemed actually to smile—a roguish smile.

Peter Moore slipped the ring onto the middle finger of his left hand, clenched his fist and brandished it about, admiring the play of light on the pure gold, the dancing of the light in the impudent emerald eyes.

"And that," De Sylva said nervously, "is worth another forty thousand. In fact, I wouldn't take forty thousand for it. The question is, am I sending good jewels after lost ones?"

The blond man looked at the elephant ring with dreamy eyes.

"They say it's a magical ring," he said. "They say it'll grant a man three wishes."

"Bunk!" De Sylva snorted. "The only magic that gems and jewels have is bad magic. There isn't a stone in that pocketful that couldn't drown a man in the blood it's spilled."

Mysteriously smiling, Peter Moore rubbed the elephant's head against the palm of his right hand.

"First wish—a successful voyage!" He shot out his hand, gripped De Sylva's, and said, "So long, Dan! I'm leaving these bags here. Don't worry about your diamonds."

He was, somewhat mysteriously, gone. Satan stared at the closed door, shook his head gloomily, and reached for a half-empty bottle of Five Star Hennessy.

CHAPTER II.

PETER DISGUISES.

REACHING the lobby, Moore was aware that trouble was lurking not far away. The shorter of the three men who had recently called at his room was slumped in a chair, smoking a cigar and staring at the elevator. When he saw Moore he sprang up. And when Moore went out into the street he followed.

The trouble-maker glanced at his watch, settled his felt hat, pulled the collar of his gray trench coat up about his neck against the clammy chill of the harbor air, and climbed into the first of the line of waiting rickshas. He knew that the man from the consulate would follow. He gave his rickshа coolie an address. As the coolie started off, Moore glanced back. The short man was scrambling into a rickshа, excitedly telling his coolie to follow.

But Moore did not tell his coolie to hurry. His objective was the House with the Black Door on Wing Lok Street, a place known among the select as the Mansion of Divine Contentment; and to tourists and most white residents of Hongkong, known not at all.

A grimy, one story stone building with corrugated steel shutters at the windows, the Mansion gave no indication that it led a charmed life.

Peter Moore paid and dismissed his coolie, advanced to the Black Door, knocked twice, then once, then twice again. The door swung open. An elderly Chinese in the servile blue of the lower class peered into his

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face and said, "Aie—master!" and stepped aside for Peter Moore to enter.

As he went in, the short man arrived. He leaped out and ran to the black door just as it softly closed. He banged on the black door with his fists. Moore sauntered through a labyrinth of rooms and corridors without hesitation, and came at length to a finely polished brass door, carved beautifully and ornamented with laughing lions and sneering tigers. This he opened without ceremony, entering a room with walls of golden silk and an atmosphere of the finest sandalwood incense.

A fat, living Buddha squatted on a teakwood stool in a corner. He was smoking an opium pipe—inhaling the acrid, perfumed puff from the sizzling pill at the very instant that Moore opened the door.

He stared at Moore with his tiny shoebutton eyes, and set the elaborately inlaid pipe down on the mother-of-pearl taboret beside him.

"By Buddha's hangnail!" he cried in a thin squeal of a voice. "But you are late! The man who wishes to capture a fleeing camel does not grasp a hair of its tail!"

Peter Moore was emptying his pockets and placing his recent precious acquisitions on the taboret beside the opium pipe.

The fat Chinese stared at the diamonds, the emeralds, the rubies, the sapphires with the avidity of a coarse, greedy nature.

"I grovel and abase myself in the muck of this miserable room in the presence of your magnificence. I am flattered that a being of your high purposes has crossed the threshold of my wretched abode and graced my inferior hospitality with the perfume of his noble presence. I am the slave to your bidding. Command!"

Moore was stripping off his clothing. He undressed to the last garment, tossing his clothes into a heap on the floor.

"Is the sedan chair ready, Yat Gow?"

"Ready and waiting, as is all else that you demanded, Ren-beh-tung!"

THE fat Chinese clapped his pudgy hands. A pair of scarlet brocaded curtains at the end of the room parted, and a tall man the color of ebony, naked to the waist, glided into the room. From the waist down he wore a blue *sarong,* for he was from the south, and on his feet he wore sapphire-blue felt sandals.

"Here, master," Yat Gow said breathlessly to Peter.

The American went to the teakwood table on which were bowls of dyes and stains. The black man dexterously applied them. He dyed Peter's hair, brows and lashes black, and he rapidly sponged a walnut stain upon his skin from head to foot. He worked swiftly and with dexterity.

While dye and stain were drying, the black slave attended to the details of Peter's face. He inserted short silver tubes in his nostrils, to change the contour of his nose and to give it a greater flare. He affixed to Peter's left earlobe a mole fashioned of soft rubber. It was complete, even with artificial hairs. And within Peter's upper lip, against the gum, he pressed a length of soft, cleverly shaped red rubber, its purpose being to increase the apparent length of his upper lip.

"By the providence of Buddha," Yat Gow piped, "his mother was a Frenchwoman and his eyes were blue—not so blue as yours, but blue. You

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will pass. You are of his height and of his build. You have his amazing animation. But you must acquire his strange manner of speech and his curious habits. It is a delicate and fine-drawn matter, my king. Yet you are cleverer than any dozen yellow men I know, and the man who holds the eyes of a needle close enough to his own eye can see the world."

"You are full of whompee juice and black smoke," the American said, laughing. "The turban!" he cried.

Yat Gow lifted the lid of a brass-studded beefwood chest. The hidden lights of the room, a golden suffusion, played upon colors quite as vivid as those of the brilliant gems on the teak-wood taboret. Here were garments fit for an Oriental nabob—the finest and richest of hand-loomed satins of cardinal red, sapphire blue, emerald green, purest white.

The turban was white. Assured that the dye and stains were dry, the American deftly wound the turban about his head in the prescribed manner—a tedious and difficult task, for in each twist, each fold of a sultan's turban is legend and history.

Next he slipped into white silk undergarments, then into baggy pantaloons of sapphire blue. A white vest embroidered with gold and worked with semi-precious stones came next. The exotic costume was topped by a long cloak of canary yellow satin with gilt braid marking all edges and a capacious pocket on either side.

The exotic nature of His Majesty Ameer Prak Chan, the Sultan of Sakara, had gone no farther than this. For footgear, good English black oxfords were correct.

Peter Moore dropped his revolver into the left pocket. The diamonds, sapphires, rubies and emeralds he scooped away from Yat Gow's gloating eyes, and poured into another pocket. To this collection he added the tiny radio receiver from his coat pocket.

He consulted himself now in the long, flawless mirror, and saw a stranger. Peter Moore, by means of clever, subtle changes, had vanished. In his place stood His Majesty the Sultan of Sakara!

Startled in spite of himself, Peter stared at his reflection. He saw a tall, slender, dark-skinned man of the most exotic description, a character, indeed, that might have stepped from the pages of an Oriental romance. His blue eyes glimmered oddly, with a touch of the sinister, in that dark countenance. He had a well-shaped nose with slightly flaring nostrils, a long upper lip.

PETER MOORE felt himself becoming, in personality, the famous Sultan of Sakara. He smiled the sultan's wolfish grin, and the reflection in the mirror grinned back with a flash of shining white teeth.

Peter Moore whirled from the mirror, struck a pose, with chest out, hands upraised, fingers spread apart, and a strange voice issued from his chest, "Yat Gow, you oily old rascal, I will bet you fifty ticals that the fly alights on the nearer lump of sugar!"

And the fat yellow man, who comprehended no English, grinned and chortled with delight and approval, "The voice and the manners are perfect, my king!"

Peter Moore devoutly hoped so. He had met the Sultan of Sakara but once, years ago, in Saigon, and he had marked the curious polyglot accent. The Sultan of Sakara had spoken English with a strong Malayan influence

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and a distinct Oxford accent overlaid on that. A hard voice, indeed, to imitate.

"Do not forget," Yat Gow said, "that you carry your left shoulder a little lower than the right. And now—now let us see you walk."

Peter walked up and down the room, with a curious, exaggerated swagger, almost a strut, setting the heels down hard, turning the toes well out.

Yat Gow burst into laughter. "Perfect, your majesty! And the mole and the nose and the upper lip! Let me hear that voice just once again!"

Still in that strange voice, but now in idiomatic southern Chinese, the American adventurer said, "Yat Gow! My chair! Instantly!"

"Your echo is my answer, my king," the fat Chinese responded. "Your chair awaits! Dessoulu! The master's chest!"

"Aie!" the black man said.

He closed the lid of the beefwood chest upon his bizarre finery and lifted it to his shoulder.

"A cape against the chill of the dawn!" Yat Gow squealed.

It was of heavy brocade, a green cape, that lent the Sultan of Sakara a final pictorial touch, if one was needed. It was lined with the heaviest of white Shantung silk—a product of the proudest silkworms and the noblest artisans in the East.

Peter draped it about himself, again viewed himself in the great mirror.

"It is perfect," Yat Gow said. "And here is your money, majesty."

He gave Peter a small but heavy blue suède bag, with drawstrings of blue satin cord at the throat. Peter opened the bag, ran his hand inside and brought forth a fistful of gold—ticals, these were, the nut-shaped coinage of Siam.

He dropped the bag into one of the ample pockets. Then, with a cheery, "Blessings of Buddha upon your house!" he went to the polished brass door which the black man held open for him.

Peter Moore threaded his way back through the familiar labyrinth. On the way he detoured from his original course to enter a small booth lined with purple satin. Here, in surroundings as ancient as the Oriental worship of ancestors, was a modern toy—a wall telephone!

The Sultan of Sakara picked up the receiver and called a number—the number of the private telephone in Daniel de Sylva's hotel bedroom.

The gem dealer instantly answered. His voice was breathless.

"I am ready to go aboard," Peter said. "Have a police boat to meet me at once at Pasig Wharf."

"Good Lord—why?"

"The Sultan of Sakara must be taken to the steamer Langpo in a style befitting his station."

"It's too damned risky!" De Sylva protested.

"The harbor is crawling with pirates," Peter answered, "who would think nothing of slitting a man's throat for a glass stickpin."

"All right, all right," De Sylva said hysterically. "I'll attend to it. So long! Good luck!"

Peter abandoned his own voice and simulated the strange accents of the insane jungle monarch he was impersonating.

"Ameer Prak Chan needs no luck!" he cried. "I have rubbed the ring!"

He clicked the receiver into the hook and went to the black door. The doorman stared at him with shocked amazement, then made a low bow. He opened the door.

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Peter went out, followed by the black slave carrying the beefwood chest.

A sedan chair with four bearers was in the street—a highly ornamental vehicle, in such taste as the insane sultan would no doubt have approved heartily. Crimson satin and gold braid had been used lavishly, and the poles themselves were inset with mother-of-pearl.

The four bearers sprang to attention. Dessoulu loaded the beefwood chest upon a small platform which extended outward from the rear of the chair proper.

Across the street a short man stood smoking a short fat cigar. Peter gave him a princely smile and entered the sedan chair. The short man did not return the smile. His stare was indifferent. Costumes as elegant, as colorful as the one Peter was wearing are not sensational in the streets of Hongkong. The short man was not interested in an opium-smoking sultan. He had eyes only for a tall, blond, blue-eyed American whom he had been told to watch until the moment the King of Asia weighed anchor and steamed away to America.

Patiently, as the ornate chair was lifted and carried away toward the water front, the short man resumed his vigil.

CHAPTER III.

GOING ABOARD.

A LONG, rakish, mahogany speedboat was waiting when the sedan chair reached the Pasig Wharf, at the foot of Cleverly Street. Officers of the harbor police in white uniforms—a dozen of them—were lined along the wharf at attention when the spurious Sultan of Sakara alighted. A police captain saluted him with a crisp "Good morning, your majesty!"

Peter acknowledged this with a smile and a gesture of the left hand, that quick, jerking gesture, as of a man about to slap a mosquito—a gesture characteristic of Ameer Prak Chan.

The police captain, a grizzled veteran, betrayed no excitement and only a logical curiosity. He was accustomed to the eccentric hours and habits of southern potentates. And when he had been told that the Sultan of Sakara wished a police escort to a steamer sailing for the south at 4 A.M. he was neither excited nor inquisitive.

His logical curiosity was, however, another matter. Why, he wished to know, was his majesty traveling to Singapore on such a small and shabby ship as the Langpo, when stately liners were clearing for that port in the morning—a Messagerie Maritimes ship, a P. & O., and a Dollar liner—all of which would land his highness in Singapore days before the Langpo, a lumbering little tub, could possibly get there?

"It is my whim," said the Sultan of Sakara.

That settled it. All rulers are whimsical. All Oriental rulers are very whimsical. And the Sultan of Sakara was notoriously one of the most whimsical rulers who ever breathed.

The black man deposited the beefwood chest in the stern of the police launch and vanished into the shades of night. The courteous white-uniformed officers waited for the sultan to arrange himself in the stern, then swarmed aboard. The lines were cast off, and the mahogany "devil-chaser" darted out across the star-studded waters toward an obscure and distant riding light.

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The fog of the earlier night had cleared, and the majestic panorama of Hongkong's harbor was spread for the delight of Peter Moore's eyes. He loved this harbor. It had become home to him. Gliding across it to the smooth rhythm of the police boat's engines, he wondered if he would ever see it again. He was filled with a sense of foreboding. He knew that he was embarking on an errand on which he might readily lose his life.

He did not underestimate the cunning and savagery of Lotus Burma—that mysterious and beautiful creature who was known, not without adequate reason, as the Octopus—and the equally mysterious and sinister powers which, he knew, she must represent.

Two hopes burned in him—that he might return Dan de Sylva's fortune in diamonds to him, and that he might dissuade Susan O'Gilvie from this worst of all her follies.

The police boat was skimming past a great liner now—one of the newest and largest ships in the transpacific run—the King of Asia. Back in the Mansion of Divine Contentment, in a pocket of his coat, were the tickets he had planned to use—tickets entitling him and his bride to the King of Asia's costliest suite—a richly merited extravagance—so he had thought when purchasing them.

With thoughtful eyes he watched the rows of lighted, brass-bound portholes stream past. A bitter smile played at his lips. He would get over it. Susan O'Gilvie would become, with time, a romantic memory. He had got what he had deserved. Susan O'Gilvie was for no man. She was no more fitted for marriage than an eagle is fitted for a cage. Nor was he. But it had been a hard lesson to learn.

The short, squat hulk of the coastwise steamer Langpo loomed close aboard now. He studied her scattered lights, her shapeless outlines, with a dreamy detachment. Susan was aboard that ship. Susan and the Octopus of Hongkong!

The dark steamer became possessed of a mystery closely related to the unknown, the untried. He tried to shake off the illogical feeling that she was a ship of mystery; that her very air, as she crouched there, had something of the sinister in it. It struck him sharply. He could not define it. She wasn't *right*. Something was indefinably wrong.

WITH sharpened faculties, he ran his eyes along the stolid bulk of the Langpo, telling himself that he was the victim of imagination. But the sensation was not to be dismissed so easily. It lingered in the air without definition, like an aura of evil. And it grew on him queerly that this was somehow no ordinary ship; that she was a haunted thing, a ship of trouble.

They were close alongside the accommodation ladder now. The voice of the police captain rang out sharply, "Langpo, ahoy!"

That they were being watched from the bridge was immediately evident, for a voice, cool and remote, replied, "Ahoy!"

"A passenger for Singapore!" the police captain called. "The Sultan of Sakara!"

There was hesitation. The dim figure on the wing of the bridge seemed to be pondering the announcement.

Impatiently the police captain inquired, "You are clearing for Soerabaya with a stop at Singapore, are you not?"

"Yes."

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"Then let us have a little light here, please. When are you sailing?"

"At once."

The dim figure was coming down from the bridge wing. The police captain murmured to the tall, exotically garbed young man beside him, "I don't like this at all, your majesty. Are you quite sure—" His voice faded off into a mumble, became clearer with the words, "—these little coastwise packets—"

"I'm quite sure," Peter said with finality.

A greasy decklight blinked on above. In the rays of it a tall, thin man stood, peering down at the police launch.

The police captain said, "Where's your captain?"

"I am Captain Barberry," the other answered. His voice was strained. It had the tight sound of a man alarmed or afraid. It was, in addition to this, a peculiar voice. Its inflections were strange.

Peter tried to place the accent. It was neither Dutch, French, Spanish, Chinese nor Japanese, that accent. It was, in fact, like no accent Peter had ever heard. It quickened his sense of uneasiness, his doubts of the Langpo's honesty.

The police captain doubtless shared this sensation. He seemed most reluctant to permit the Sultan of Sakara to go aboard.

Captain Barberry was leaning on the handrail. Peter could not see his face. He had an impression of cropped, bristling black hair, like that of a convict, of dull, dead eyes.

"I am afraid we have no accommodations fit for a sultan," he said.

"I am not particular," the Sultan of Sakara said cheerfully.

"But we have no room whatever for another passenger."

"Room can always be found for a sultan," the Sultan of Sakara said with a ring of command in his voice.

"Your majesty," the police captain began, "I advise—"

"My mind is made up."

Captain Barberry was peering down into his uplifted face. "But, your majesty, I believe there are other ships, finer and faster than this miserable tub, sailing for Singapore later this morning. We have the most wretched of accommodations."

The police captain, when the sultan had made no reply, said, "Captain, his majesty has the whimsical notion that he wishes to travel to Singapore by this ship."

"It is not whimsical," Peter said sharply, in the voice of a monarch whose will is being crossed. "There are certain people traveling on those other ships whom I wish to avoid. Besides, this filthy little tub appeals to my sense of the comic."

"One moment—please!" Captain Barberry begged. "I must consult the steward."

CHAPTER IV.

THE OCTOPUS.

LOUNGING on a pile of purple cushions, the most dangerous woman in China smoked a perfumed cigarette in an amethyst holder and listened serenely to the excited expostulations of the captain of the Langpo.

His strange gray face had a frightened look. A man evidently trained to repress his impulses, Captain Barberry was, with great difficulty, modulating his voice and restraining his alarm.

"The Sultan of Sakara insists on a passage to Singapore!"

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And the woman known as the Octopus softly drawled, "Then let him have a passage to Singapore."

"But, madam, the presence of this sultan will spoil everything!"

"On the contrary," the beautiful woman answered, "the presence of this sultan will afford me both pleasure and profit."

"But it is dangerous, madam. He is too important. And it is, if you ask me, suspicious."

"Why?"

"Why should a sultan wish to travel on a ship like this when three fine liners are sailing for Singapore a few hours from now?"

"The Sultan of Sakara is the most whimsical monarch on earth. Let him indulge his whim. Bring him here and get under way at once."

"Yes, madam. He came in a police boat. I do not like that at all. Our papers are by no means open to close scrutiny."

"Did the police officers ask for your papers?"

"No, madam, but they were aware that we are clearing for Soerabaya via Singapore."

"Ah," Lotus Burma said contemptuously, "your blood has turned to ice water. Bring the sultan here and let us leave this wretched place immediately."

Captain Barberry departed. On deck, he instructed men to carry his majesty's trunk aboard and to stow it in Stateroom Six. The Sultan of Sakara climbed the ladder to the deck and got a better view of the captain's face.

It was a strange, gray face, somehow sinister, somehow evil. In it was a strange blending of many races—the sensuous lips of the Latins, the peaked brows of the Near East, and the almond eyes of the Far East, yet they were slate gray and dead. A stirringly odd face. It made the American wonder.

"If you please, your majesty—this way." Again, that strange impression of utterly unfamiliar accents, or a blending of many accents, and with it a ghostly feeling. A fantastic thought occurred to Peter: it was as if this voice were being projected out of Captain Barberry's mouth from a lost age. It was curious and it was preposterous. Yet he could not rid himself of the conviction that there was creeping mystery, creeping horror, aboard this slattern of the seas.

He followed Captain Barberry to a door midway around the after turn of the deck. This door bore no numeral or letter.

Captain Barberry pushed open the door, and for a moment Peter's presence of mind, his assurance, deserted him.

"Come, come, this is not my stateroom," he protested.

"No, your majesty," the strange voice whispered.

Peter had caught a glimpse of royal purple hangings, of a slender woman reclining on a tumbled mass of purple cushions. A tendril of incense smoke reached out to encircle his head like a ghostly arm. The fumes were sweet and spicy in his nostrils.

"The Sultan of Sakara, madam," Captain Barberry said, and withdrew. The door clicked shut behind Peter Moore, and he was face to face again with Lotus Burma, the most mysterious woman he had ever known, and the most barbarically beautiful.

But the instant the door closed he was himself again. He did what the Sultan of Sakara would certainly have done under the circumstances, for that

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insane young monarch had been a connoisseur of beautiful women. In them, indeed, Peter suspected, Ameer Prak Chan had found his doom.

HE walked across the room with a strut and a swagger, stopped, kissed the tips of his fingers, and sent the caress, as if it had bulk and body, snapping from the tips of his fingers. His eyes whimsically followed its imagined course. The kiss bounced against the ceiling, and his dancing eyes followed it to the dangerous and beautiful creature reclining on the cushions.

She studied him with a lazy and mysterious smile. She was queenly in a gown of royal purple. Her features were as symmetrical as a porcelain Buddha's. Her eyes were large and lustrous, like wet grapes. Her skin was like cream—not white, not yellow, but a soft and amazing shade in between. She had the slim perfection of a goddess. She was ageless. She might have been twenty or forty.

A slim, graceful arm moved in languid gesture as she placed a stiletto on an amethyst holder to her red lips, puffed and breathed out the smoke in an enchanted vapor.

There was something hypnotic about this woman — a dangerous, secret charm. In her was perfectly expressed the exotic lure of all Eastern lands. Peter could understand how Susan might have been fascinated by this amazing woman. In spite of his danger, he was stirred, as he had been in his previous encounter with her. For the beauty of Lotus Burma was of the kind that challenges the masculinity of any man.

In a sweet, husky contralto she said, drawling, "I am flattered, your majesty. And I am charmed."

"This," said the spurious sultan enthusiastically, "should be a voyage of —shall we say infinitely delightful possibilities?"

She laughed softly. Her eyes glowed with a tantalizing mystery. "Shall we? Who knows? I understand you are a great gambler?"

The Sultan of Sakara uttered the quick, barking laughter which was characteristic of the Sultan of Sakara. "I'll gamble now, my princess! I'll wager this ring against that rope of pearls that I'll be madly in love with you before we touch Singapore!"

Lotus Burma laughed again and fingered the rope of pearls. They were priceless—blue pearls. And ropes of black pearls were twined about her slim wrists.

He was extending his hand, and Lotus Burma bent forward a little to inspect the ring. Her eyes became bright. "Ah! The elephant ring! How charming! How whimsical!"

And Peter knew that Lotus Burma firmly intended to possess that ring before this remarkable voyage was over. Would she possess the ring—or would he possess two million dollars' worth of diamonds belonging rightfully to the great but threatened De Sylva Corporation?

She was still staring at the ring, smiling. Only in her mouth was the legend of her cruelty confirmed. It was a lovely mouth, a sensuous mouth, a mouth capable of infinite passion and infinite barbarity. She had tortured to death the De Sylva agent who had had the diamonds—by stabbing him repeatedly with a long silver pin! Perhaps her cruelty explained her lips. They were as vividly red as the lips of a mythological vampire.

The astounding black veil of her lashes lifted. Her eyes glowed at him.

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She lowered the amethyst holder and looked into his eyes with a faint, mysterious smile.

"It is the most beautiful ring in the world!"

In spite of himself, Peter was fascinated. Her languor, her sensuousness, made her as dangerous as a lazily awakening python.

"IS it true," she said lightly, "that you play a game of marbles with precious stones?"

He laughed again. He got down on his knees and plunged a hand into one of the capacious pockets of his satin coat. He brought out a small fistful of stones. He tossed a diamond and a sapphire into the air and caught them in his other hand. He opened both hands and sent the stones tumbling across the carpet.

Lotus Burma swiftly leaned forward. One of the stones, a sapphire, had rolled within reach. She studied it, turning it quickly about in her long, slender fingers, letting the light strike blue fire from its facets.

"A pretty thing," she said. "Chantaboun."

But she was watching him as he crawled about, gathering up the scattered stones, and laughing, with derision. Her laughter was, to Peter, a betrayal. It implied so much. It was indulgent.

It conveyed to him that she had heard the stories of Ameer Prak Chan's childishness over precious stones. It conveyed that she considered him the softest kind of victim.

"Let us make a bet," she said, as if with inspiration. "Do you hear that rumbling and grinding, your majesty?"

The Sultan of Sakara cocked his turbaned head. "I do!"

"It means our anchor is coming out of the mud. Presently our engines will turn. But—look! We are pointed, not toward the sea but toward the City of Hongkong. We must turn about sharply. In turning, we will veer to one side or the other. Which will it be—port or starboard?"

"Starboard!" the sultan cried.

"We will fill a glass to the very brim with water," Lotus Burma said gayly. She sprang up and went to a washstand in a corner of the large room. She took a drinking glass from a wall socket and filled it.

Peter watched her with shimmering eyes. He knew that his proving, for her benefit, the legend that the Sultan of Sakara played marbles with precious stones had filled her with instant contempt. And he wondered what her game would be. But he felt that just so long as she did not penetrate his disguise he was safe. Just so long as she believed him to be the sultan, she would not dare murder him for the elephant ring or his precious stones, because the Hongkong police knew that he was a passenger on this ship for Singapore.

She was returning with the glass, walking with great care, watching the brimming glass with large and shining eyes. The purple robe clung to her and revealed the slim, delicate perfection of her body. It was hard to believe that a woman so beautifully made could be so vicious.

He was still kneeling, looking up at her. She was within a dozen inches of him, holding the glass so steadily that not a drop had been spilled. Amazing control! Perfume from her slim body reached him, seemed to wrap about him in a sweet, alluring wave. It was the most seductive perfume he had ever smelled. It seemed to breathe from her

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body with a promise of mysterious and unimaginable delights. In him it prompted a sudden, upthrusting wave of heat.

She lowered the glass to the carpet beside him. It was still full.

"The ship will tilt slightly when she turns about. If she tilts to starboard, water will be spilled out on this side, and if she tilts to port, water will spill from this side."

She seemed to have entered gayly into the caprice.

"What shall we bet, your majesty?"

HIS voice automatically said, "Precious stones, my princess!" for he had planned on saying that; but his heart stood still and his brain went cold.

In frosted letters upon the side of the glass was the name of a ship. The name was not that, however, of this ship. It was Aronga. And as he stared at the name a chill wave of apprehension swept along his spine, and the sense of creeping mystery returned with an impact that would have left his face a bleached white had it not been for the walnut stain.

For the Aronga was one of that host of mystery ships—a ship lost without trace ten or twelve years ago in the Jaws of Hell! She had left Hongkong for Saigon on a night in December. And she had never been reported again. She had vanished as if, indeed, the sea had suddenly opened up and engulfed her. What was that glass doing here?

"You see?" Lotus Burma gayly cried. "Not a drop was spilled!"

"Not a drop!" the sultan breathed.

"But why are you so shocked?"

"I have never seen such steadiness in a woman. It is amazing!"

She laughed softly. "The engines are starting! We are about to turn! You say starboard! I say port! Hai-yah! We shall bet!"

She reached under one of the cushions. Her hand returned with a black box about ten inches wide by four in width, by three in depth. It was tied shut with black satin ribbon. She removed the ribbon.

She lifted the lid—and Peter Moore's eyes were shocked by the frosty white stabbing glitter of more diamonds than he had ever seen in one mass in his life.

The box was as brimful of diamonds as was the Aronga's drinking glass with water. Diamonds of all shapes and sizes. All blue white. All doubtless perfect. Without question the De Sylva diamonds—the treasure trove for which he had come aboard this ship prepared to risk his life!

He had a reckless impulse to snatch the box from her hand, to run to the rail, to leap overboard and swim for his life. It would have been the easiest way. And it would have been a practical way. He was a strong swimmer. He had recently mastered the art of staying under water for minutes at a time. He could surely escape.

But he would not snatch the diamonds. He was, as Dan de Sylva had declared, riding two horses. He could not leave this mysterious ship until he had exerted all his powers to deliver Susan O'Gilvie from this woman. De Sylva had said, "You can't mix romance with this kind of job." And De Sylva was right.

"They dazzle you!" Lotus Burma cried. She scooped a dozen of them into the palm of her hand. She spilled these onto the carpet beside the drinking glass. "I will bet these against that sapphire, that diamond and that ruby!"

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"You are a woman after my own heart," Peter exclaimed, matching her gusto. "I will take that bet, my princess!"

She closed the box, wrapped the ribbon about it, and tossed it back carelessly among the purple cushions. It might have been as worthless as, say, a box of candy. Two million dollars' worth of diamonds! Her very casualness was disconcerting—it plainly indicated her indifference to danger. Quite possibly she had nothing whatever to fear.

SHE was kneeling opposite him—on the other side of the glass of water. She was staring into it with her hands raised above it. She was like a sorceress gazing into a crystal, compelling from it the secrets of the past, the present, the future. Uneasiness stole over the Sultan of Sakara.

As if in a dream, he saw water forming in a rising, round mound against the left hand lip of the glass. The mound broke over gently, and water flowed down over the frosted name of the lost ship.

"Port!" Lotus Burma cried. "I win the bet!"

She snatched up the diamond, the ruby and the sapphire which he had placed beside the glass. She snatched up the diamonds she had placed on the other side.

The Sultan of Sakara rose with a flashing grin. He went to the door and he said, "Beautiful women are always too lucky. We will have other bets. I love to bet."

"I, too, love to bet, your majesty." There was a betraying gleam in her eyes as they lingered a moment on the fabulous elephant ring. It was stark, quickly shuttered greed.

He knew that it was her simple plan to possess the ring and the rest of his precious stones before the Langpo reached Singapore. One by one, she would somehow contrive to secure them, and in such a way that he could make no complaint to the authorities had he wished.

He had, of course, no interest in the authorities. When Singapore was reached, Peter intended to walk ashore not only with the diamonds De Sylva had lent him but the contents of that box of hers, too. Her wits against his! He would have been amazed to know the fantastic designs of the fate in store for him.

He had left Lotus Burma's quarters more hurriedly than appearances would indicate. The air of that place had grown too thick for him. Not the perfume of that exotic, beautiful, cruel woman, or the incense from the braziers. Two shocks had come too quickly for him—first the drinking glass bearing the name of that ghost ship, the Aronga; then the sudden, sensational display of the fortune in diamonds.

He needed to breathe, to slip out of his rôle for a moment, to think. And he wanted to look over this mysterious ship.

On deck, with the door of her room closed behind him, he set his thoughts in order. The lure of that sinister woman was still upon him. He was conscious of an actual wish, a sharp desire, to return to her now. It was a terrific power she had over men, like a false beacon luring a ship to destruction.

Common sense washed that impulse away, was replaced by a sensation no less troublesome and infinitely more grotesque. It was the old feeling that the Langpo was a ship creeping with mystery. The strangeness of Captain

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Barberry returned to perplex him afresh.

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERY SHIP.

HE strolled forward. The Langpo was sliding out of the strait and into the open sea, softly wheezing along. Peter found his stateroom, Number Six, halfway down the deck on the port side. A light was burning over the washstand. His beefwood trunk had been placed beside the bunk.

Peter placed his pocket radio receiver in the trunk and looked about the room. It was typical of all the staterooms he had seen on ships of the Langpo's class. A double decker bunk against one wall; a wardrobe built across one corner—always too short to hang an overcoat or a pair of pants full length; a washstand beside the narrow seat which ran beneath the window; a faded green carpet on the floor; a smell of staleness.

A bulb of low wattage pulsed above the washstand mirror. The old familiarity of his surroundings restored to Peter a sense of ease and security. He heard the grinding and rumbling of a winch as a hatch was covered; he felt the steady shuddering of woodwork. All of this was rational and homelike.

Then his roving glance changed to alight on the towel rack. Three white hand towels—typical ship's towels—were hung on the rack. On each the name of a ship was sewn in red thread. But the name he read was not that of the Langpo. It was Pelgrasse.

The Pelgrasse was another mystery of the China coast! She had been a Greek ship, bound from Hongkong to Athens. On a spring morning, six or seven years ago, the Pelgrasse had left Singapore—and never been seen again! She, too, had fitted into that old blood-chilling legend. She, too, had been engulfed in the Jaws of Hell!

The drinking glass in Lotus Burma's room might have been a coincidence. But the two together could not be dismissed so easily.

What, Peter wanted to know, were the towels and the drinking glass of two ghost ships, reputed victims of the Jaws of Hell, doing on this ship?

Shivering a little, he opened the door and looked across the deck. Three men, deckhands or stewards, walked forward along the deck through the shaft of light from his doorway.

As they passed, all three glanced at him, and he was so startled that he gasped. Not only did each member of this trio have the strange, dull gray eyes of Captain Barberry, but they strikingly resembled him in other particulars.

They had the same slack mouths, the same colorless, flat hair, the same narrow foreheads. Even the contours of their faces were identical. And in each of them Peter got the impression of a heavy-boned body—and of an order of intelligence hardly higher than that of an idiot. They seemed to drool. They were like three robots, as they mechanically planted their feet and picked them up again—three men with that idiotic vacancy of eye, that impression that they were machines of flesh and blood. Dull-eyed men! Gray men! What race was this? It was baffling.

It was as if ghosts were staring at him. There was no flicker of interest, no brightening in the eyes of these men. If a man's very soul had perished, his eyes might resemble these.

The men passed on, and Peter Moore stepped quickly on deck, his

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heart thumping, his spine cold, sweat prickling on his brows and chin.

Gray shadows, they retreated, setting their feet down with slow and dull precision. In passing, their feet had made no sound. They vanished.

Until recently it had not occurred to Peter that the ship on which Lotus Burma had booked passage to Java might prove to be an unusual ship. He realized now that it was the most extraordinary ship on which he had ever traveled.

ACROSS from the doorway of his stateroom was a lifeboat under a tarpaulin. An ordinary lifeboat, dried out by tropical suns—the kind of a lifeboat you would expect to find on a ship like the Langpo. A lapstraked double-ender. At one end, high on the cutwater, was an eyebolt, placed there for towing purposes. Something dark and dry drooped from the eyebolt.

Curiously Peter went to it, examined it. Seaweed. Dry enough to crumple up and blow away. It was a wisp of seaweed, not yellow weed, but grayish blue—the kind of seaweed found only at great depths!

True, this type of weed often detached itself from rocks and floated to the surface. But its presence in this eyebolt was discomforting. It quickened the sense of mystery which seemed to touch everywhere about this ship—mystery and unreality.

Peter had the eerie sensation that he was aboard a haunted ship manned by ghosts. Certainly, in all his travels, he had never encountered humans so strange as these, or on any ship on which he had ever sailed had he seen seamen look or act so queerly as these. Why did they look alike?

His mind played with fantastic theories. Was this ship actually commanded by Lotus Burma—a woman notorious for black practices, infamous for the way she controlled the destinies of men?

Was she actually a sorceress? He could not rid himself of the mystic feeling he had had when she peered into the drinking glass brimful of water, or of the feeling that in her darkly O r i e n t a l soul were queerly occult powers.

This was dangerous territory, yet something was wrong with the very heartbeat of the Langpo, an uneasiness to her rhythm, a stealth to the very way she c r e p t through the black water.

Definitely and decisively, something was wrong with this ship; but he could not guess what it might be.

He walked to a fidley hatch to investigate, and found that all engine-room hatches were covered with frosted glass, and were screwed or nailed down tight. Why? There was a deck grating near by, and he found that by backing away from it he could see into the engine room through a small aperture between steam pipes.

He saw a portion of the engine room, a familiar enough glimpse of steam gauges and throttle handles. A man was standing on the steel deck looking up at the gauges.

His face was c l e a r l y lighted by a pulsing bulb overhead. Peter stared down at it with fascination. It was the face of a corpse—a corpse magically animated with the grimaces of life, but with the dull eyes of death. It might have been Captain Barberry—or either of those three. Who were these men?

Peter shivered a little. Again he was swept by the chilling suspicion that this ship of mystery was manned by

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ghosts—living ghosts of flesh and blood—dead men with the breath of life blown into them by the black magic of Lotus Burma.

THEN this fantastic suspicion was driven away by an odor as from another world. Perfume! A familiar, haunting fragrance. It came on the wind, and with it came a woman, who set her little high heels down sharply.

She went past him in the darkness, walking rapidly. He did not see her face, but he would have known that quick step, that alert, gallant little head, the slender, diminutive figure, anywhere.

She wore a gray fur coat—and he recognized the coat. It was chinchilla, most expensive fur in existence. That coat had cost its wearer no less than fifty thousand dollars.

She walked rapidly, her high heels tapping sharply on the deck. For a moment Peter could not move. He had reassured himself that when he met Susan O'Gilvie again he would be calm and collected; that he would deal with the situation coolly. He had even made himself believe that he would not be upset when he saw her; that he had hardened himself so successfully against her that she would fail to move him.

His present symptoms were, however, not those of a man immune. Quite as if she exerted an irresistible magnetism, he followed her aft. The thrill hunter had gone to the taffrail. With her gloved hands upon it, she looked somehow forlorn. He went to the rail some eight feet away from her and watched her.

Dimly, in the lights of the receding city, he could see her profile—a crisp and beautiful profile.

Her fragrance reached him again—and made him thrill again. He saw her shoulders twitch and twitch again. And he wondered what she was thinking about. An impulse grew strong in him to walk over to her, to crush her into his arms; to demand of her that she give up this latest pursuit of thrills.

Perhaps she was crying. Perhaps she was sorry for him. She turned away from the lights of the city. She stared up at him a moment, but her eyes were not wet. They were beautiful eyes, the color of fresh violets. And they were bright with excitement. She stared at him a moment, then turned and walked away, and the staccato of her heels on the deck was like the rippling tattoo of castanets.

In that glimpse of her, Susan O'Gilvie had looked very warm, very vital. But the glimpse had told nothing of her voice and very little of her reckless personality. At a glance, Susan O'Gilvie was a normal girl—and an exceptionally beautiful girl. But glimpses and glances were very deceiving.

Reputed to be the richest young woman in America, if not in the world, Susan O'Gilvie was an insatiable thrill hunter—a girl with a craving, a hunter for adventurous excitement that nothing could appease. Time after time, since she had been in Asia, she had plunged herself into dangerous predicaments, and had frantically called upon Peter Moore to help. Since the eventful night of their meeting on the transpacific crossing, she had—always with the most innocent of intentions—drawn him into one dangerous Oriental complication after another. It was as if she had deliberately spun a web of enchantment about the young man, a web with threads of gold.

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For almost two years this had been going on. And for these two years, Peter had refused to consider marriage because of Susan's great wealth. He had weakened very recently. Their marriage was to have taken place this morning. And until a few hours ago, he had considered himself the happiest and luckiest man on earth.

His thrill hunter had, in a few swift hours, changed all that. Unable to resist the lure of adventure, she had fallen under the influence of Lotus Burma. Doubtless, the Octopus had promised Susan thrills, adventure, excitement. And she had, at the same time, acquainted her with the most insidious, most amazing drug of which Peter had ever heard—a scented purple stuff which gave to its victims a ruthless sense of exaltation and power.

He knew that he had lost Susan forever, but he considered her a definite responsibility. It was his intention to take her ashore in Singapore and to take her aboard a ship bound for the United States.

That was Peter Moore's plan, and somehow he intended to carry it through.

WHEN Susan O'Gilvie entered Lotus Burma's room her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were starry with excitement. Lotus Burma lazily regarded her from under half-lowered lids, the amethyst cigarette holder dropping from a corner of her beautiful, cruel, red mouth.

Breathlessly Susan burst out, "Who is it—in the turban and the satin cape?"

And the Octopus, lazily studying her, drawled, "The Sultan of Sakara, my dear."

With this girl she used a voice that was a caress, soft and purring—her most hypnotic inflection. To bend this spirited American girl to her plans, to cause her to expel Peter Moore from her heart, had been a difficult task; because the girl had been so madly in love with that reckless adventurer. But the promise of Oriental adventure more exciting than Peter could ever offer, of a glimpse into the inner life of Asia's most exotic peoples, had won her.

Looking at Susan O'Gilvie now, Lotus Burma was satisfied. She had not erred in selecting Susan. Susan fulfilled all of the requirements of the order which the Octopus was obeying. The American girl was beautiful and she was healthy. She was the most beautiful white girl Lotus Burma had ever seen, with a slim, beautiful body over which any man might reasonably lose his reason.

Susan was smiling expectantly, and her violet eyes were radiant.

"And who is the Sultan of Sakara?"

"You've never heard of him?"

"Never!"

"He is the most amusing young despot in the Far East. His sultanate is in the northern end of Malaya, not far from the Siamese border. He is tremendously rich, very eccentric and very charming. His mother was a Frenchwoman. He was educated at Oxford. He is mad about horse racing, gambling, precious stones—and women. He is considered a connoisseur of women. His reputation is dangerous. He is half Malay—a very dangerous mixture."

"I'll be on my guard," Susan said lightly.

On the deck, on the starboard side, Peter Moore, at a partly opened window, had heard most of this. He complimented himself on having made a

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correct impression on Lotus Burma. But his interest was centered in the American girl and in the symptoms she was betraying—symptoms with which he had reason to be painfully familiar. For here, to Susan, was another thrill. A half-mad, half-breed sultan! At present he was more afraid of Susan, however, than of Lotus Burma. Susan knew him so well, his mannerisms, his tricks of voice and gesture. If she penetrated his disguise, she would, he was certain, betray him to Lotus Burma.

There was an unexpected and shocking development. The door of the room opened and Captain Barberry came in. His strange gray face was working. Only his eyes, with their hunted, dead look, betrayed no emotion.

"Madam," he gasped, "he is aboard this ship!"

Lotus Burma narrowed her eyes.

"Peter Moore?" she snapped.

"Yes, madam! I am certain!"

She darted a glance at Susan.

"Tsi-Lo-Lan, you are to have nothing to do with this fellow!"

Tsi-Lo-Lan—Chinese for violet—was the woman's name for Susan, because of the color of her eyes.

Susan said firmly, "I have no intention of seeing that man!"

PETER MOORE backed away from the window with a sudden tightening of muscles in his solar plexus, as if he expected a fist to be driven there. His first reaction to that announcement was one of anger. Obviously, some one who knew him well—and some one no doubt in the crew—had seen him and recognized him, despite his elaborate and, as he had thought, perfect disguise.

In the course of many adventures in Oriental lands, he had assumed many disguises, but he had been certain that none he had ever worn could be compared to this. When he had played the part of the Sultan of Sakara just a little longer, had perfected the sultan's curious accent and more fully mastered his habitual gestures, he was certain that he could deceive even Susan, who knew him better, perhaps, than any one on earth.

Yet some one had suspected or guessed—had somehow penetrated to the truth.

It meant that his entire elaborate plan was ruined. He could not secure the De Sylva diamonds, and he could make no progress with his plan to spirit Susan ashore and out of Lotus Burma's power, in Singapore.

More than that, his very life was threatened. For he—Peter Moore—was Lotus Burma's sworn enemy, and she would not hesitate to put him to death. In so far as help from any source was concerned, he was lost. This mystery ship was unquestionably under Lotus Burma's command, and its queer dead-faced men were so many slaves.

In his anger and anxiety, he was striding along the deck, his satin cape floating out behind, crackling in the wind. He could overcome the wireless operator, and flash a message to Hongkong for help. He might signal a ship in the American battle fleet. His request for help might or might not be denied. For he was on a sort of blacklist with all the authorities.

This plan, however, appealed to him. The Langpo and her mystery were richly deserving of official investigation. And in the confusion of a high seas search he might be able to forward his other plans. He did not know what type of wireless equipment was installed on the Langpo, but he

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was well versed in wireless telegraphy, and quite familiar with the various types of installations in shipboard use, for he had been a wireless operator for several years in the China run from America, and in the China coastwise trade.

He found the wireless room forward of the funnel, and saw, with relief, that the plate over the door was that of the Radio Corporation of America.

As he reached for the knob of the door, the door swung open. He stepped quickly back to avoid being bowled over by it. A man was silhouetted in the dazzling lights which hung over the instruments.

Staring at him, Peter Moore forgot his dramatic plan. He had intended to rush in, to overpower the operator—to knock him senseless, if necessary—and to transmit messages to Hongkong and the Asiatic fleet. But he did not even move. He was so shocked that he could not move. The brooding mystery of the Langpo in that instant seemed to pounce upon him and overwhelm him with its chilling terror.

For the man in the wireless room doorway, in his gray trench coat, his gray felt hat, was *himself!* With the hair at the nape of his neck stirring, Peter Moore stared into the shockingly familiar face of Peter Moore!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

The Lantern Telegraph

AT the end of the last century, before the French had run electric telegraphs as far south as Touggourt in the Sahara Desert, the little frontier town was connected to Biskra to the north by a string of towers twenty to thirty miles apart, which also ran south as far as Wargla. Each square stone tower, fifty or sixty feet high, had two magic lanterns—one facing north, one south, with shuttered lenses so arranged that the flashes could be sent as a telegraph, merely by pushing a key. Four men were required, one to send each way, another to receive. Telescopes were used to pick up the flashes. Messages from anywhere in the world were received at Biskra and relayed across the desert with scarcely an error.

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King's Ransom

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "Roll and Go," "Sons of the Prophet," etc

An ancient treasure, a white king with a mad dream, and two thugs await Burt James on a Caribbean isle

James suddenly lost all desire to laugh

CHAPTER I.

ISLAND JUNGLE.

IN a way it amused Burt James to have the two men following him so closely and so well. They were right behind him now, not a hundred yards away, and he could hear them crawling through the scraping, stiff guinea grass and around the clumps of Spanish bayonet, moving when he moved, stopping when he did. Of course, James thought, it would not be funny later on, not at all. His own presence here would make enough danger and trouble, and the pair there were perfectly capable and willing, he knew, of making a whole lot more, just as long as they held the idea that he was after treasure and they somehow could get it from him.

James carried a pistol, a big .45 automatic, strapped low to his left side in a flexible rubber holster. He had never shot a man with it, never even shot at a man, but, over in Yucatan, when he had been working on the Mayan ruins excavations job, he had spent several hundred rounds in target practice in the bush, and the gun felt comfortable in his hand, answered reliably to his aim. To plug those two nosey guys behind now would be no hard job at all. But, where would he be then?

He halted, squatted down on his haunches in the high grass, and swung

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around, took out the black pistol, slid his fingers up around the grip and the trigger guard. Again the pair had stopped; he could mark exactly where

Novelette—
Complete

"What are you doing here, and why have you come?"

by the still slowly swaying grass, black against the softly silvered outline of the early tropical starlight on the sea beyond. Coldly, with a good deal of logic, but swiftly, he considered how he could get rid of that pair, and the menace they meant not only to him personally but all he wished to do.

They were competent, he knew, and quite willing to be desperate, else they would not be here now, would not have followed him here from the coast of Haiti, and, before that, from New Orleans. Naturally, they were misinformed as to his reasons for being here, and they thought of only one thing: the treasure, the old Spanish or French colonial stuff they believed they could rob from him, after he had led them to it.

That was just where it stopped getting funny, Burt James thought: those two were unshaken in the idea that he was a crook like themselves, and, as far as they went, they had pretty good reasons for believing so. After all, he said silently and ruefully to himself now, they did certainly know that he had asked for leave from his archæological duties at the museum in New York and told his directors he wished to spend six months in personal exploration of some of the back New Mexican country, but, instead of that, had ducked out, down to New Orleans, gone aboard ship under a false name there, and headed right for Port au Prince in Haiti, then for here, for this

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little island of Le Berceau, off the Haitian coast.

His one really bad break was that he had bumped into the pair in New Orleans. Because he'd met them both down in Yucatan the year before and they knew he was assistant director of the museum in New York. Even then, though, if he'd been a better liar they might have believed him, that he was going on from New Orleans to Santa Fé, instead of trailing him, finding him registered aboard ship under another name.

The pair were smart; in Yucatan the authorities had finally expelled them, but for no provable crimes; although, after some seemingly casual conversations with various museum expedition parties they met up in the back Mayan country, ruins had been raided, robbed of their antique and practically priceless collections of old gold ornaments and precious stones. One of the pair, the little Englishman, Hedges, had told him one time when they met on a river, there in Yucatan, "You're wasting your time, laddie, looking for fame with a shovel and a magnifying glass. Take the stuff you find first, and the fame after. Honesty's a virtue the loving old museum will pay you about two thousand a year for, with a brace of thanks tossed in for anything you might find that's really worthwhile. Don't let me spoil an honest young archæologist, though."

"No fear," he had answered Hedges. "You can't. But don't come dawdling around any of our camps, 'just to pass an evening's conversation'; you might get a slap alongside the jaw."

Hedges and his sallow, fat partner, Ripa, the Venezuelan, had just laughed at that, and Hedges had signed to their canoe Indians, and they had gone on down the river. Now, staring through the thin softness of the Caribbean starlight, the pistol gripped in his hand, Burt James spoke aloud to himself in a whisper. "That half pint Englishman really thinks I have taken his advice. He thinks I'm not playing on the square with my museum. Well, in a sense I'm not, but only to the point that I'm taking my leave here instead of in New Mexico. And that, after all, is my business. Not one bit of theirs, before, now, or later."

ANGER came hotly to him then. Muscle knots formed at the corners of his jaws and he stood fully upright, so that the upper half of his lean, strong body was exposed above the grass. He was on the point of speaking to them, ordering them to turn and go back, get in their boat down there on the beach and return to Haiti, before he let go at them with the pistol, but some of the logic he had summoned before still held in him.

It was strangely as Hedges had said that day on the jungle river in Yucatan, he thought: If you got the fame first, the money did come after, and in the six years he had been out of college and working for the museum, he had got very little money and the other, older men had got almost all the fame. It was his turn, his chance now, and only his. He had gambled a lot to come here, he had taken all his savings to pay for this trip, and he had lied to his museum chiefs.

Hedges and the other man, Ripa, must have verified that fact, of his lying to his chiefs, telegraphed to New York and found he had announced New Mexico as his destination, and they, too, knowing the Central Americas and the Caribbean, had heard some of the wild and fabulous stories of this

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little island of Le Berceau. He could not shake the pair now, unless he drove them from here at the point of his gun, and they would undoubtedly resist and fight if he did that. And then these strange island people would be down upon their heads, his head, and he could not afford that at any cost. Not now, when he had got this far . . .

But James stood motionless for a moment more in the pale starshine. He could feel Hedge's and Ripa's unseen eyes upon him. They were ready for action now, too, he sensed; they held guns in their hands and awaited the first overt action from him. There was no doubt that they had shot to kill at more than one man before, and no doubt in their minds that he sought great treasure here. In Yucatan, they must have heard the old and twisted, fantastic story of this place. Perhaps they had even, if only vaguely, heard of the "King's Ransom," the thing he sought—heard enough, coupled with his actions, to arouse all their natural cupidity and gold lust, their desire to possess what was rightly some other man's.

But, and now Burt James smiled a little bit, they did not know what he did about Le Berceau, and, if the records he had seen in the dusty, practically forgotten files of the old Mexican governor's office in Yucatan were right, no man alive knew as much about this place as he. James swung around, his back to the pair in the grass. He slid the automatic back into its holster. He looked forward and up, at the rocky, stark pile of the island and the old, tumbled castle of Le Berceau.

Over on the Haitian shore, at Mole St. Nicholas, the lighthouse beam licked winging out upon the sea, swung, subsided. Some of it reached dimly here, so that this place was momentarily illuminated. Straggling cane patches reached up the slope in front of him, and he saw the shapes of thin palms, old bayahonde and hatcha trees, then the bleak, high irregularities of the castle walls. A Frenchman had built this place, a Chevan, one of the same name and family as the man who so strangely owned it now; brought his labor and his stone from Haiti and reared his château here during the great, golden days of the French colonial empire. That old Chevan had made of this place truly a kingdom of his own; it was he who had given it the strange name, Le Berceau—The Cradle.

For he had brought the pick of the blacks here from Haiti, the cream of the African tribes the slave-runners had carried out from the Ivory Coast and Dahomey. The old records and old scandal said that the white Frenchman, Chevan, had planned in all truth to create a real kingdom of the blacks here, ruled by a white man, by himself. But then a republic had been established in France, and the news spread to Haiti, and the blacks and the mulattoes revolted against their rulers, the whites, killed or drove them from the main island, and even old Chevan here, who wore a crown of his own design and called himself king, had been forced to go, and his ship had been driven by storm to the Yucatan coast. Chevan had died there, in Yucatan, more of a broken heart than anything else, they said, but he had talked with the Mexican governor first, and laboriously, exactly, the governor had written down all the strange Frenchman said.

SINCE then, for a long time, the blacks had had this place. Christophe, the giant black who had named himself Henry, King of the

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North in Haiti, and built the vast Citadel behind Cape Haitian, he had taken over Le Berceau and the château of the dead white man, made a fort of it, an actual armed castle, for one of his sons, only to lose his own power and die himself, his son after him. But some of the Chevan family had lived, gone on finally, the sons and daughters, to New Orleans. In their time, some of them had dickered with a black emperor of Haiti, the man who named himself Soulouque, and Soulouque had let them have it, Le Berceau, back again; the island blacks of Le Berceau demanded it; they said they had never had any hatred for the white Chevans, only love, and a desire for them as rulers.

So the Chevans, one part of the family, had come back. They had ruled here ever since, on this little island not ten miles long and four miles wide. Over in Haiti, in the capital at Port au Prince, the succession of rulers had looked upon it as a kind of mild joke; if the blacks of Le Berceau wanted white men to rule them, all right, if the white men kept the blacks in order, and paid the taxes due from the island into the never full Haitian coffers. Soulouque's law was there, unchanged in the archives, and no other man, not even a black man, had any desire to try to govern or to call himself King of Le Berceau; the blacks were a fierce and weird kind there, and liked only one kind of man to obey, and, if they chose, to call king.

There were two of them here now, the Chevans, of the same old family. There was Girard Chevan, the man who named himself King, and there was his daughter, Helene. Burt James had heard about them, in New Orleans, where the other branch of the family lived, good, solid, Louisianan Creole folks now, only a little bit surprised that a girl as young and as lovely and as intelligent as Helene Chevan, after finishing her course at Tulane University, had been wholly willing to go back and take her place at her father's side, in much the same way as her mother, a woman of Louisiana Creole blood, had also elected when Girard Chevan had came north and sought and won her as his bride.

King Girard; Princess Helene. Burt James whispered those words, but not smiling now. He would have to meet and speak with those folks immediately, so somehow he might find the thing they called the "King's Ransom," inside the huge, cracked walls and winding passages of the old castle ahead.

Burt James did not look back again; he went up along the increasingly steep slope towards the castle. The cane thinned, became a corn field, and above his head, eerie in the darkness, the arms of a windmill, relic of the old colonial times, swung creaking in the slight breeze, and then he was in among houses and people. They were the low, crude huts of the island blacks. Chickens crowed and fluttered where they were tied inside the huts against rats and thieves; a couple of scrawny dogs came forth, gazed upon him with dully stupid eyes, then mournfully began to bark.

In the huts, he heard other sounds: men getting up from their banana stem sleeping mats, taking machetes down from the rafters, coming to the doors, awakened by the dogs and their subconscious knowledge even in sleep of his passing. But they stood quietly there in their doorways, without speech or movement, and he did not turn his head to look at them, but kept going on towards the high, gaunt black shape

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of the portcullis gate leading into the castle.

WHERE two old cast-iron cannons, surrounded by heaped piles of rusted shot, lay before the edges of what had once been designed as a moat, he was spoken to for the first time.

"*Qui moune ca?*" The voice was deep, but sharp, edged with distrust and dislike, but not yet could he see the man who had challenged. He knew something of the Creole, had studied everything he could find on it in the North since he had returned from Yucatan.

"*Ami,*" he answered. "Friend."

"*Qui moune?*" that deep and biting voice repeated, and now he could see the man. He had stepped out of the shadows of the gate and another stood beside him, both immense, blacker than the shadows they had contained themselves in, dressed in tall shakos and long uniform coats, almost the exact cut and color, Burt James saw, as those of Napoleon's grenadiers. But these two men carried machetes in their belts, besides the old, clumsy muskets at their shoulders, and the man who had spoken was drawing his heavy-bladed knife quickly forth.

"A stranger," Burt James went on in the Creole. "But, a friend. I am looking for the King; *je che'che le roi* Girard."

For a moment, the black who had spoken looked at his silent companion, his eyes seeming light in that darkness, and then he stepped forward with a speed that Burt James never had seen before in any other man. He put the curved end of the machete up against the American's throat, and then with his free hand he deftly, swiftly searched Burt James's body and clothing. James cursed himself even before the black fingers touched his jacket; he should have thrown away, he knew now, the pistol and the holster he wore. Friends, in this country, and on this island, did not come wearing hidden arms, or any arms at all . . .

A low kind of growling sound came from the sentry; his fingers had just fastened upon the automatic, and he was drawing it forth into his hand. Then, in *patois* far too thick and fast for James to understand, he spoke to his companion. To James, he said after the other sentry had gone pounding barefooted in over the cracked planks of the bridge:

"You turn, I shoot you. With your own gun."

"Don't worry." Burt James was smiling a little bit; behind, the dogs were silent around the huts, and he was aware that Hedges and the Venezuelan had been just clever enough to stop, see that he came on and was found, alone. "I won't turn at all," he said emphatically. "Not until you tell me to, soldier. I want to see your King, or the Princess Helene."

The sentry did not answer that, just stood palming the automatic in his hand until the other uniformed black came back. "*Vini,*" he said then to Burt James. "Come. Follow that other man, but walk slow—nice and very slow."

Burt James walked nice and slow, between them, the man with his pistol behind him. Inside, through the portcullis, a light burned somewhere, a kerosene flare stuck far up in a wall stanchion, and James could see a time-worn crest of arms over the stonework of the gate, then a score more of blacks in incredibly fantastic and old uniforms, all silent, staring and sullen, obviously just awakened from their

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night's sleep in the ancient guard room, but fully clothed and armed.

CHAPTER II.

COLD RECEPTION.

THEY strode through the portcullis gate, they went past the double line of staring soldiers, and then were in a low, damp stone passage where there was hardly any light at all and the Negroes' feet whispered along the paving and Burt James's boot heels made loud, strong sounds. But then out of that passage they emerged into a huge room. James had never seen a room like it in his life, had never expected to, even here.

It was perhaps eighty feet high and fifty feet long, stone throughout, with fireplaces in all four corners and windows that were narrow, long and barred gashes through which the starlight and fresh air washed thinly. There was little or no furniture in the place, a few, big, heavy tables, made of *acajou,* the local Haitian mahogany, four or five chairs grouped around them, and then one huge chair, deviously and intricately carved, a crest of arms upon its back, red plush upon its arms and seat, a sagging canopy of red plush and tarnished gold lace above it. The throne chair, Burt James thought, the chair from which white men had ruled over blacks for more than a century. It was unoccupied now, but beside it, in another chair almost equally as startling and imposing, light from two kerosene wall flares tumbling in a yellow flood down upon her head, sat the girl whom Burt James recognized instantly as Helene Chevan, the daughter of the man who called himself King of Le Berceau.

Staring at her, slowing so that the sentry at his back jammed him between the shoulders with his own pistol muzzle, Burt James felt an almost inescapable desire for laughter. She was so modern, so lovely and typically American, sitting there in that chair in that gloomy and somehow grim room, dressed in a gay printed dress, wearing buckskin sport shoes and a bright bandeau about her blond, shortly cut hair. But then her blue, keen eyes lifted and met his eyes fully, and he lost all desire or need for laughter.

"YOU are lucky to be here, and alive," she said. Her English was as sure, as purely accented as his own. "What are you doing here, and why do you think you have come?"

"Thanks," Burt James said, seriously. "I'm glad to be alive. I came to see your father, King Girard."

Her eyes narrowed, watching his eyes, and one hand slid out upon the carven arm of the chair. "What do you know about my father—about King Girard?"

Burt James shrugged one shoulder, breaking his glance from hers for a moment and staring around the room before he brought it back again. "They say a lot of things about him," he said.

"What things that concern you?"

"They say," Burt James said unhurriedly, "that he is a real king here, and that you are a real princess. That he actually rules this island people, keeps them from being spoiled by the outside world, sees that their old traditions and religion, their essential African way of living, remain unchanged."

"How," she asked, her voice as sharp and as flat as the blade of the machete the Negro held behind him, "did you learn these things, and what are they to you?"

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Burt James shrugged the same shoulder; there could be no lying here, he knew, not to this girl, and he was through with that, anyhow; he had done more than enough of that, already. "It's my business to know such things," he said. "I'm an archæologist. I'm assistant director of one of the museums in New York."

Helene Chevan had relaxed so that she sat back in the chair, her blond head against the crested wood, and she was softly, easily laughing at him. "You have papers to prove that? Credentials?"

"No, none. Not with me, here."

"And you have permission from the Haitian government, from anybody, to come here?"

"The same answer again: no. I"—a throb of anger was beginning to beat in Burt James's head and his strong hands were fisting up—"I couldn't bring papers, and I couldn't ask for official permission from anybody, under the circumstances."

"Still, you're an archæologist, and you're assistant director of some museum in New York?"

"Yes."

She was sitting forward in the chair again, and, suddenly, she got down from it, came to stand right before him, only several paces away. "Go on," she prompted him, "let's hear some more of these comic-cutup lies."

"I'm not lying," he said hoarsely, slowly, trying his best now to keep his voice even, calm.

"But you come here in the middle of the night, unannounced, with a gun hidden inside your clothing, and you try to walk right in past my—past our—sentries. And your interest in Le Berceau is still only archæological?"

"Yes; that's right."

Helene Chevan smiled; Burt James could not remember a more insulting or infuriating smile. "Somehow," she said, "you don't look like a cheap thief, and a liar. But give me some more of these comedy answers. Just why did you come, in the middle of the night, and come armed?"

Underneath his breath, Burt James cursed. To her, Helene Chevan, he said, "Because a couple of other people besides yourself have already misinterpreted my motives for coming here. A couple of crooked gents, tropical gangsters I met in Yucatan last year, trailed me down here from New Orleans. They're outside now, hiding somewhere on the island; they came after me from Haiti to-night. They think I'm after treasure."

She gave him the cold little smile once more. "And what, actually, are you after?"

BURT JAMES stared around the room, slowly brought his eyes again to her intense face and glance. "I've heard that you practice the primitive religions here, that you practice the *Vodou,* and another religion that predates and is much older than the *Vodou.* So—"

Her lean, sunburned hand was out against his shoulder, gripping hard. "Stop," she said. "I've heard enough from you, and know enough. If you are an archæologist from some museum, and came here like this in the middle of the night, you are an absolute fool. I don't believe you are—an archæologist; I more than half believe you are a liar and a thief. More than that, a coward, or you would not have come here into the castle—throwing yourself on our mercy like this, with some tale of two armed and dangerous crooks outside. . . . . Were you afraid to face them, or did you think you

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could gull me into believing all this—baloney?"

Burt James started to answer her; hot and strong words formed in his brain, but then his head turned and he looked towards the far door of the room also, with her. A man stood there, a white man. He was tall and old, stooped and gaunt, shaking with the island fever even now, his face and eyes dulled with it, yet still somehow magnificent. Burt James did not need the girl's words to know who that man was, did not need the stiff, snapped salutes of the blacks behind him; you need only glance, he thought, to recognize Girard Chevan, King of Le Berceau.

"Who is it?" Girard Chevan's voice was low, muted with pain, expressed in soft, archaic French. "Who is this white man, Helene?"

"A visitor." She spoke calmly, crossing swiftly to the doorway and his side, taking the arm of his loose, faded uniform jacket. "A visitor who was mistaken as to where he was, and who is going, right away. He bears his apologies to you, *père*, and he is going now." She turned around as she said that, and her eyes swept Burt James's face, with no demand for pity, for sympathy or full understanding in them, only challenge, as though, in a way, she wished for him to speak now, contradict her.

Girard Chevan was shaking in the ague of his fever and his weakness until the little, tarnished tassels at the tops of his knee-high patent leather boots jerked. But his hand had gone down, to the hilt of the long, heavy saber he carried at his hip, his head and eyes come up. "But," he said in that low and strained voice, "I overheard words—'crooks'—'guns.'"

"No," she said; her hand was tenderly in against his shoulder. "And if you did, they meant nothing. This man, this stranger, will tell you that."

"That is so, sire," Burt James said slowly in his college French. "I've been mistaken, and I'm going now." He was calm then, sure, coldly in command of himself, and, he knew, very sick of lying. He brought his heels together and his hands flatly at his sides; he bowed to the man who called himself King of Le Berceau, he bowed to Helene Chevan. "I'll go now," he said, facing Girard Chevan, but speaking to her, "if I have your permission."

She smiled, and it was still a smile of challenge. "Yes," she said, "you can go now. Perhaps, from now, you will not be mistaken."

He did not answer that; he just turned and followed the two blacks to whom she had given a terse order in Creole, and, silently, he was laughing at himself, at what he had thought he could do here, and what Hedges and the Venezuelan, Ripa, would do to him when he came forth, unarmed... At the door, though, the entrance to the passage leading out to the portcullis, he looked back once. But the girl and Girard Chevan were already gone; the throne room was empty, and, from behind, the big sentry was shoving him between the shoulder blades with what had been his gun.

CHAPTER III.

BEACH BATTLE.

HE met with Hedges and Ripa on the beach, just where the water came sucking up across the dark stone. He was alone then, and they were alone; his guards had left him far back, at the edge of the ragged village around the castle. One of the pair of

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blacks, the man who had taken his gun, telling him to get off the island while he still lived. Oddly, Hedges said much the same thing when he and Ripa came up behind him in the fading of the starlight:

"You think you'll get off here while you still live, hey, me son?"

"I don't know," Burt James answered him. He stopped and stood still, watching them as though idly, his empty hands hanging loosely at his sides.

"*Madre!*" Ripa said. "We do."

"Maybe," James said, his voice flat, "you're telling me?"

"Just that." Any appearance of calmness or ease was gone from Hedges now. "We want what you've got, chap. And we want it right now. You may be in with these island folks, or you may not be. That doesn't matter much to Ripa and me. So, now—"

"Listen," Burt James said. "I haven't got anything. Do you pair of lugs hear me? I haven't got anything you might possibly want. Not even a gun."

"You lie!" the little Englishman said in an almost screaming voice. "You're after treasure; there's treasure here. Stories all through the islands tell about treasure old man Chevan, the first one, had to leave here when he was forced out. And you know where it is; you got to those old records in Yucatan, deciphered 'em. What else is a pot-brained kid like you throwing away his chances of a future and lying to his bosses for? So, come tell us, laddie, before we lace the ears in for you, and make a real honest liar out of you."

They were both armed, held their weapons in their hands, and Hedges's pistol was already half raised. But James did not reckon upon that; there was only one thought dominant in his mind: he had been called a liar just once too much to-night, and now he was through . . . Stepping in, right past Hedges's pistol, he struck the Englishman a full-handed blow in the mouth.

"You mug!" he said hoarsely. "You stupid mug!"

The Englishman went to his knees in the grass with that blow, his pistol exploding a cartridge wildly into the sea, and James leapt on past him at the bigger, slower man, Ripa. But Ripa was a more cautious and wise man than his partner; he side-stepped the American, lifted the automatic flatly in his hand and let James have it across the temple.

The pain was numbing, nauseating; it made James shut his eyes and lurch in his stride. Even then he turned and tried to hit at them, but they were both upon him. Hedges was as swift and as vicious as a ferret. He tackled James shoulder high, striking with his pistol barrel and butt also, helping Ripa's tattoo of savage blows. Before them, still half blind and a little more than semiconscious, James dropped away, back into the grass, his hands and arms up protectively over his face. Above him, he dully could hear Hedges's panting voice, "Don't kill him, *primo*, don't kill him! He's got to squawk first and tell us where it is, then—"

MORE than from the sound of the man's voice than any actual sight of him, James lashed out, gathering his weight up upon his hands behind him, kicking out with his heavily booted foot. He caught Hedges squarely an inch or so below the kneecap, all but breaking the bone, sending the man reeling down. Hedges turned a little insane then; he swung the automatic in his hand and fired.

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Ripa cursed him for that. "You're a fool," he told him in Spanish, "a stupid fool. You'll have the whole lot of them out here on us now, and you haven't hit that young goat once. Watch—listen! I'll get him, but not with any lead, and noise—"

"Yeah?" Burt James said to that. He was up off his knees now, trying to get fully to his feet.

"*Si!*" the Venezuelan said, made a pass at him with the machete he held, then crossed in with the pistol muzzle, striking him again across that bruised and bleeding temple. "Just like that, *hermano* . . . Three, four more like that, maybe, and the baby talks for papa, hey? Me, I won't kill you, I won't even knock you out; I'll just hurt you plenty enough, so you'll talk, and tell old Pedruchio where those crazy French hid their gold. Speak!"

Burt James drove at him in a headlong tackle, in under the machete and the pistol, sent the bigger and heavier man sprawling with him. But, chuckling, Ripa rolled away, came back, was pinning him down with his superior weight, ripping at his shoulder muscles with a galvanic finger grip, yanking him up then, to be struck, James knew, again and then again, until he spoke. His fumbling and his blind hands went out. He sought to strike Ripa anywhere, anyhow, laughing at him, cursing at him in a thick voice which made no real words, trying to shake the blood from his eyes so he could see Ripa's face, or Hedges's face.

But Ripa was not there, he was gone. And through the cloud of pain in and around his brain he could hear other voices, then shots, and the sounds a boat made being hastily scraped down the beach and shoved off into deep water, the splash of sweeps and the creaking of a gaff and boom as a sail was run up. But James stood there and laughed, staggering and waving his arms, staring blindly with his blood-filled eyes.

"You're yellow!" he called. "You're yellow! You can't take it! Hey, Hedges—come on back and take it!"

Then somebody had him by the arm, was quietly stopping his staggering and his pain-mad calling, and sanity came into him as he listened to and recognized the voice. It was the girl he had seen up in the castle; it was Helene Chevan. And her words to him, quietly uttered just before he fainted and slid down through her grasp into the grass, were:

"Let them go; stop yelling. If they like you this much, they'll probably be back, and try to take it . . ."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SERPENT.

HE was not greatly surprised when he awoke and found her there seated near him. All through his tossing sleep and unconsciousness he had been dreaming and thinking of her. She sat on a low wooden bench across the room, just silently staring at him.

For a time he did nothing but stare back, content to study her and gauge her, attempt to bring back into his brain all that had happened before consciousness ended for him. It came to him, bit by bit, so that at last he could make a whole of it, and smile at her there across the bare, stone-walled room, seeing that she wore khaki breeches and boots now, carried a holstered pistol at her hip.

"I'm a prisoner?" he said first.

She nodded, smiling too. "Until you can prove yourself otherwise."

"O.K." He reached down and

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found the water *cruche* beside his cot, lifted it and drank deep. Then, looking at her again, "I remember the last time we really talked, among the things you doubted that I said was one about there being two rather tough characters on the island outside your guards, yourself, and myself."

Simply, without hesitation, her glance level, she said, "That's right. That's one you win. Now, why don't you go on from there?"

"I will," he said. "I want to. I know it's impolite, but I'm as hollow as a banker's heart . . . Couldn't I eat, before I confess my life away?"

She nodded gravely. "It's coming. I ordered food for you when I first saw you were stirring around and going to wake up. Can you begin, though, before the food is here?"

"Yes; I can try . . . My name's Burt James. Maybe I didn't tell you that before. I'm assistant director of a museum in New York, and I'm an archæologist; that I did tell you before."

"That you did. So, what?"

"So, last year, this Burt James is down in Yucatan doing some Mayan ruins excavation work for his outfit and gets down to town once in a while and gets to know a young and educated Mexican who's a clerk in the governor's office. The clerk speaks of all the old Spanish colonial records in the files; stuff that nobody except the rats has seen in years, and that he, the clerk, is frankly too lazy to go through. But that's an archæologist's job, digging into rat-eaten stuff. Those old records were swell, but the best part wasn't about Yucatan, or the Mayans, or the colonial Spanish; it was about an island called Le Berceau, and a family named Chevan, and how and why they wanted to and did start a kingdom of the blacks off the Haitian coast."

"You interest me," Helene Chevan said in a calm voice. "You interest me very much . . . Go on."

"I thought I would," Burt James said. "And I will—go on. But will you listen to me?"

"That depends." Her voice harshened, saying that.

BURT JAMES scowled down for an instant at his bruised and plastered hands. "Look here," he said in a slow voice, "do you really think I'm on the square now, or don't you?"

She smiled a little at that, although her eyes were gravely intent. "I'm beginning to believe you're on the square."

"All right. Will you be on the square with me, then? Because if you are, no fooling, it will be immeasurably better for—all of us."

"Just what do you mean?" she said. "I can give no promises."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm asking you to give honest answers to some questions I believe it absolutely necessary that I give you. Of course, any one you don't want to answer, you can just keep silent about."

She sat very still, and staring, her blue eyes darkened and narrowed. "Go ahead," she said in a flat voice. "Ask."

"Thanks," Burt James said, propping himself still higher up in the cot. "The first Chevan that came out from France to the islands went to Haiti, didn't he, and started a plantation in back of Cape Haitian?"

"Yes; that's absolutely true."

"But, later, he left and came out here. For two big reasons. One was because he thought blacks were real, living, feeling people, and he wouldn't treat his slaves as the majority of his neighbors did. Is that so?"

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"That's so."

"And the second reason was perhaps the more important one. Your ancestor, that first Chevan, had the good luck, or the bad luck, however you figure it, to buy in at the open slave market in Haiti an Ardra Negro named Kyolo, who, among the slaves, was regarded as no other black, because he'd been king of a huge inland tribe in Africa before the Arab slave-runners caught him, but also had been head priest of the secret but famous Heart Clan, who—"

"—I've heard about Kyolo," she said. Her voice was not very calm now, and her hands were stretched flatly and tightly out upon the knees of her riding breeches. "Kyolo had been a king of the Ardras tribe in Africa, but . . ."

"Go on," Burt James said.

Her face had gone quite pale, making her eyes appear huge, and dark. "Where did you hear these things?"

"I found them in those old records your ancestor left in Yucatan. Are they all correct, so far?"

"Yes," she said, but only after a long moment of silence. "They are all correct, but—" Then she tried to smile. "Go on; I can take it!"

Burt James turned his head and eyes; she was staring at the door and the passage beyond, but at last her glance came back to his. "This Kyolo," he said, "was one of Chevan's slaves then, wasn't he?"

"My ancestor bought him as a slave, yes. But he—"

"—He never made him serve as one. He respected and considered Kyolo as a king in his own right, all but freed him. Of course, there was more to it than that, because Kyolo possessed an immense power over all the other blacks, and he was the head priest of the Heart Clan, and he and all the other blacks worshipped the Serpent—"

"Don't!" she said. "Don't!" Her hands were stretched out to him almost as though in supplication. "No one can mention that here, not in this house, not on this island. My father—" Her voice dropped to a whisper, dropped to silence. Bare feet were slithering over the stones of the passage outside, then an old and withered Negro woman came into the room. She wore the clothing of a servant, a cheap, faded calico dress and a colored madras turban around her flat, wide forehead, but her eyes as she set down the wooden food tray were intelligent, swift, and there was no servility, no hesitance in her voice as she spoke briefly in Creole with Helene Chevan, turned and went away.

"What did she say?" Burt James asked when he could no longer hear the bare footsteps in the passageway. "Sometimes I get the Creole, and sometimes I don't."

"She said that this wasn't the usual white man's food," Helene Chevan said in a voice just above a whisper. She pointed to the tray with its boiled yams and *grilot* of mutton and island rice. "That's all."

Burt James shook his head. "It sounded like more."

"Maybe it did," she said. "But, if you know so much, tell me the rest. You must, immediately. Because you are not safe here, and even I—I. Now I'm being very darn silly. But do go ahead."

BURT JAMES had lived long enough in the out places to know always to eat food when it was before him. He had shovelled in several big mouthfuls of the mutton and

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rice before he answered. "But you must know all of this yourself; it's really your family history."

"No," she said. "Some things I don't know. And wish I did. Truly, I could scream, you're so calm."

He stared at her. "No, I'm not," he said. "I'm just wondering how big a packet of trouble I've stupidly brought upon this place. But, you say you want the history. This's the rest of it: that first Chevan left Haiti and bought this island, came to live out here; he was too great a friend of the blacks, the other white planters said, and here he could do just as he pleased. Of course, your ancestor and Kyolo had the idea about the—Serpent then. The real Serpent, the thing, the actual object all the tribes of central Africa revered and worshipped, was in the hands of the remaining members of the priestly Heart Clan, in Africa. But, to get Kyolo, their head priest and king back, they were willing to smuggle that age-old serpent made of silver and precious stones out to Haiti. As a sign to the other blacks, so that all of them in the islands, outnumbering the whites a hundred to one, would at least see Kyolo freed and sent home, if they did not all break loose and accompany him, accompany Kyolo and his white friend and now brother priest, the Frenchman, Chevan."

Burt James slowed his voice. But Helene Chevan sat as though tranced forward on the bench, her eyes luminously on his face. He moved his bandaged hands in front of him impatiently and gave her a quick, rueful smile. "There really isn't much more to tell. That holy object, the sacred serpent, was actually smuggled out from Africa, somehow, in some slave ship, how, no one will probably ever know. It was sent, as I said, as a sign to all the other blacks to follow and to obey Kyolo, if not Kyolo, Chevan. It was in fact a 'king's ransom,' the most precious thing the African blacks could find to send to their enslaved and stolen brothers . . . But, by the time it got here, Kyolo was dying; he had contracted the fever and nothing, not all the witchcraft of *Vodou* and of the Serpent worship, not even the presence of the holy Serpent itself, could save him. He died, clasping the Serpent, and—"

"—I know the rest," she said. Her voice was hoarse, rapid. "The rest has been the dream of my family for a century. That some day they, whites, possessing this sacred serpent, might go back to Africa and found an empire greater than that dreamed of by Cecil Rhodes, greater than that of any other white man's, or black man's. That is why they have ruled as kings here, and the blacks have obeyed them. That is why this place is called 'The Cradle'—because from here it would all start, and from here the King's Ransom would be returned. My father believes in that; it's the one vast dream of his life, his obsession, that and the black religion which has got him more and more since my mother's death. He is a head priest of the black religion, he worships the Serpent, and even the *Vodou* snake god, Domballa . . .

"I know those things. I've either known them or suspected them, and fought against them. Just as my mother did, once she found out. But it does no harm here, on this little, isolated island, except to us, as a family, and always my father and the other family men have been waiting for the moment, for the 'signs of the serpent' to be 'right' to go to Africa. That, to them, would be a conquest beyond dreams.

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"But," she was trying to smile now, "we're shocking poor here, and have been for a long time. And it takes money to get to Africa, to do all they want to do, so the serpent which was sent as poor old Kyolo's ransom has been hidden, and nobody is supposed to know where it is. My ancestor, the man who died in Yucatan, hid it, before this place was fully built, in some secret corner I don't know . . . But you know, don't you? And you're after it, you want it, this serpent?"

Burt James did not answer her; he had no time. Listening to her, the eagerness and the nervousness, the fright, almost, in her voice, he had thought of and listened to nothing else. But against the silence she had let come into the little room at the last of her words, the voice from the doorway clashed loudly. Girard Chevan, King of Le Berceau, stood there, and at his side stood the old and withered Negro woman who not ten minutes before had been here with a tray of food in her hands.

CHAPTER V.

"GO AND GET HIM!"

"I HEAR," Girard Chevan said, speaking to his daughter and as though she were alone in the room, "that the white man who was here, and sent away, has somehow returned."

Helene Chevan stood straight from the bench. She gazed fully into her father's eyes.

"He was hurt," she said. "He was wounded, and I could not see leaving him out there. But I thought you knew those things, *père*."

"I know them now," Girard Chevan said in that voice which had somewhere in it the qualities of the ringing of a deep, cracked bell. "I know a number of things."

His daughter turned her head a little bit. Burt James was getting up from the cot, staggering slightly as he reached for his boots and his jacket where the blacks who had carried him here had put them last night. "If you wish that he leaves now," Helene Chevan said, "I'll see to it."

The man who called himself the King of Le Berceau gave to her a smile which was a compound of bitterness and weariness. "I shall do that," he said. "I shall tend to him alone. And you shall leave now; you will go with Madame 'Zele, here."

"I can go alone," Helene Chevan said, but she was stepping back into the room, closer to Burt James. "There's nothing I want from Madame 'Zele, and nothing she can do for me."

Girard Chevan lifted one hand and put it upon his worn sword belt; with the other, behind him, he made a sign. Then he stepped a little aside. Four of the giant uniformed blacks had been standing there, in the shadows of the passage.

Their hands were upon the hilts of the machetes they wore in their belts; their eyes were on Burt James.

"Go and get him," Girard Chevan said to them simply in a low voice. "Take him from here . . ."

"Just a minute!" It was Helene Chevan who spoke, and her voice was as low and as even as her father's. "I have asked you to listen to me many times, and not to that old, black, make-believe witch there . . . Now, you're going to!" One of her hands, the left, moved quickly, in under the hem of the short duck jacket she wore, and came forth containing a small and evil-muzzled automatic. "Back!" she said to the blacks who now jammed the

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doorway. "*Reculez!* Back, and keep on going back!"

Before her, they went back; it was in her eyes and in her voice that they must do so, and otherwise that she would shoot them where they stood. And then Burt James was beside her and beyond her, reaching out with his bandaged hands rapidly, making a sheaf of the machetes he dragged from their belts, keeping one, the sharpest, separate in one hand.

"Good," she said to him in a flat voice. "That's the baby...But keep an eye upon that old wretch, 'Zele, there, and my father; bring them along, too, after me and those boys. This has all been coming for a long time; perhaps it shouldn't come now, but here it is. Bring them here, into the throne room, but you can let my father keep his sword."

In the great, chill throne room she lined the four black soldiers with their faces to the wall, instructed Burt James to take their strong leather duty-belts from them and with them make fast their hands. Then she turned upon her father and upon the woman called Madame 'Zele.

"I don't fully know what you want," she said, speaking to her father, "but I have a fairly good idea. You want to get rid of this man here, Burt James. You want to kill him, because you know that he's in possession of the fact about the 'King's Ransom'—your sacred serpent. You might even do that: get rid of him. But I know the same things, and you won't and can't get rid of me. And I want the same thing James does; I want to see your precious serpent in a museum, inside a glass case. That's where it belongs—and only where. So, now that you know these things, just what do you want to do, besides sending this man from the island, and, if you do, me with him?"

HELENE CHEVAN had been looking fixedly at her father as she spoke, all the power of her gaze and her eloquence upon him. It was the old Negress, 'Zele, who moved from his side, lifting up from inside the folds of her dress a knife, whirling it in a throwing motion in her hand. At once, though, Helene Chevan shot at her.

The bullet missed, missed by feet, for the Negress was already in forward motion, rushing in upon the girl and still holding the knife.

Burt James had never handled a machete before, and swung it broadsided, like a baseball bat, letting clatter to the floor the other weapons. The flat of the broad blade caught the Negress full upon the shoulder, knocked her spinning, down, weeping and screaming in awful bursts of sounds.

And the four men against the wall had turned, hearing the shot, the impact of the blow and the woman's cried words, ripping their hands from the grip of the belts about them. "*Restela!*" Helene Chevan called strongly at them. "Stay there, or I shoot!"

But their rage had gone beyond the fear of her and the small, dark pistol now, and they came on, slowly, surely, eyeing her, eyeing Burt James and the swinging blade of his machete, watching also the other weapons he had let drop to the floor.

"*Assez!*" Helene Chevan called to them. "One more pace, and I shoot!"

"No." The voice came from behind, from the doorway of the passage leading out to the portcullis and the gate. "We'll do that. The lieutenant, here, will oblige with that little favor . . ."

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The blacks stopped, stood gaping, then shuffled backwards, away from the three men who were advancing steadily out into the room. Helene Chevan had turned, and Burt James turned with her, although he had already recognized that voice. It was Hedges who stood there, small, dapper, almost saucy looking. Ripa stood beside the Englishman, his hands hunched in his jacket pockets also, and on the other side of the Venezuelan was the third man, a white who wore the neat khaki uniform, the Sam Browne belt and topee of a lieutenant of the National Guard of Haiti, a blue-barreled submachine gun balanced lightly at his hip.

"Just in time, eh?" Hedges said. "Just in time to hold the curtain up on the end of the second act. Well, the third one's going to be played over in the nice little jail at Cape Haitien. But I guess you can speak your own piece, can't you, lieutenant?"

"Yes, I can," the uniformed man with the Thompson gun said. "This looks exactly like my job." He brought the muzzle of the Thompson around a bit, upon Helene Chevan and upon Burt James. "Drop those," he said, indicating with his head the pistol and the machete they held. "Drop 'em!" He nodded, watching the weapons slide jouncing to the floor. "Now, stand back, over there. That's it." Still holding the gun so, at his hip, he moved forward until he was only a pace or two away from the silent and rigid form of Girard Chevan.

"I think I know you," he said. "Even if perhaps you don't know me. You're Girard Chevan, the man who's supposed to run this place."

"I rule it," Girard Chevan said in a high, uneven voice. "But I do not know you, nor these other men, and I do not want at all to know you and the men with you."

THE man with the Thompson gun gave him a slight smile. "My name is Murchey. I'm a First Lieutenant in the *Garde Nationale d'Haiti*. I've got a warrant for your arrest, the arrest of your daughter and of James, there, and a blanket warrant for any one else I might want to hold, in my pocket. These two men with me came along only to identify James and the blacks who beat and robbed them here last night, on this island. I'm here to bring you back to Cape Haitian. I have my signed orders here, and I have the warrants."

For an instant, Girard Chevan closed his deep-socketed and red-shot eyes as if in complete weariness and lack of hope. But then his eyes opened and his magnificent head came up. "I must ask you to show me both those documents," he said.

The man named Murchey nodded to him, sliding one hand into his tunic to bring two stiffly rattling papers out and hold them forth. It was four or five minutes while Girard Chevan stood there and read them and there was a complete, an almost impossibly strained tensity in the room until he spoke, handing them back. "Those seem to be correct," he said in his slow, now gentle voice. "I cannot deny them. I must, of course, deny the charges the warrants contain against myself and my daughter."

"*Père*—" Helene Chevan began, starting to move forward into the room and to her father's side, but Burt James's hand was in against her wrist then, and she could just hear the softly whispered sentence he said. She stopped, and stood quietly as she had before.

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Murchey was looking at her, the same smile on his broad, tanned, hard face. "You wanted to say something, *ma'mselle?*" he asked her.

"No," she said, her voice grave, near a whisper, "I only wished to express sympathy to my father, that is all."

"Good," Murchey said, looking quickly aside at Hedges and the Venezuelan. "Things are bad enough as they are. You are under arrest, all of you in this room. You'll be imprisoned here, until it's ready for me to take you over to St. Nicholas. You, *ma'mselle,* can tell those blacks of yours if they make one miscue, I'll have to shoot them—immediately and thoroughly. Tell them, too, to put their hands over their heads, right now."

He stood there, the evil, squat gun at his hip, until he had them, the four black guards, the old and staggering Negress, Girard Chevan, Helene and Burt James, in a tight kind of group in the middle of the room. Then over his shoulder he spoke to Hedges. "Hedges, I'll have to use you as a kind of informal deputy until this show is over; go down that hall there first. I'm going to lock all these people in one room until this place has been searched and all the arms I find in it dumped into the sea; that's orders, too. Then I'm going to round up all the other blacks on the place, and if you can, you'll identify the men who helped James and the girl rob you last night. Get going!"

CHAPTER VI.

"I'LL TELL."

IT was the room in which Burt James had spent the night. Murchey, prodding some of the more reluctant and sullen blacks with the Thompson gun muzzle, shoved them in there one by one, seeing to it that first Hedges and the Venezuelan had tightly lashed their hands with rope.

"You might try escaping, or scrapping with yourselves again," he said. "But I wouldn't advise it. The court over in Cape Haitien will find you all the trouble you want. I'll be back!" He had already examined the big iron bars of the one window; now, stepping back, he slammed and locked the square, thick mahogany door. Through it, only briefly, those inside could hear his boot heels and the steps of Hedges and Ripa going rapidly off down the passage.

In there, the light was gray, unreal, casting strange shadows upon all of them, and the four black guards had already crouched by themselves in a corner, sunken far down on their haunches, silent, puzzled and enraged beyond speech. Girard Chevan had dropped to the rumpled cot, sat with his long-fingered hands up along his temples, his eyes shut, voiceless and motionless. Close up against the door, as though by some spell of her magic she could rend it open and pass through it, Madame 'Zele squatted, fingering over the vari-colored string of *Vodou* beads she had managed to draw forth from some fold in her dress, her voice softly muttering a long and incanted religious exhortation.

BACK across the room from her, in the far corner, Burt James and Helene Chevan stood alone. To her, in a whisper so low it was nearly impossible for her to understand although she stood right beside him, Burt James spoke:

"Do you believe me now, that this man the two crooks have brought back with them is a fake?"

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She gave him a wry little smile, answered him in the same sort of whisper. "How can I doubt it? I didn't, after you first spoke. I didn't see those papers he had; only my father did, of course. They might have been very good fakes indeed, but his eyes are bad, and the light was bad, and he was in no mood to be very analytical or critical. But these things about this place and about Haiti I do know: there are no more white, American officers in the Haitian Guard any more, below the rank of major. And never has any officer of the Guard, or anybody in the Guard, been equipped with a Thompson gun. Those two things are obviously and completely wrong."

"You're believing me more and more," Burt James said.

"I'm being forced to," she told him. "But, look; don't you think if we worked around for a while, one of us could slide these ropes off our wrists, and then you could maybe break a leg off the cot or off that bench, and get up and pry loose the bars in the window, get out and get help, real help?"

Burt James smiled at her in the dim light. "You still persist in mistaking me: I'm a striving young archæologist; not a contortionist. And, even if I were, what good would it do? Does anybody else, any of the other blacks outside, know where the Serpent is kept?"

"No. I don't even know that myself. Although I suspect it is somewhere down behind the secret *Vodou* altar in the old dungeons. My father and that old hag, 'Zele, who's a *Vodou* priestess, they're the only ones who really know—unless you do."

"All I know, and 've hoped, is that it's really here, somewhere in the castle. Your old ancestor, the original Chevan, was careful enough to leave any exact location of the hiding place out, no matter what else he did tell the Mexican governor. But don't worry; those three smart-boy crooks will be back. They must be badly pressed for time, or they wouldn't be pulling any such obviously dangerous and faulty gag as this, and I'm still wondering where they got that lieutenant's uniform their friend Murchey is wearing. They'll hunt around for a while, and then they'll come back. This is a big place in which a whole lot of hunting can be done, and those three aren't the kind to wait long for anything. They know, too, that one of us here must know where the 'ransom' is. Listen to that; we've got callers, already . . . But let me do it, will you? Will you trust me—now?"

Her bound hands went out and caught upon his for a moment. "I would," she whispered, "even if I didn't have to!"

The door was opening, opening swiftly. All three of them, Murchey, Hedges and the Venezuelan, Ripa, stood there. Hedges held the sub-machine gun now, and Ripa and the third man, Murchey, had just put down electric lanterns, were swiping cobwebs and the dirt of old, damp walls and recesses from their faces and clothing.

"I'll do this," Ripa said to the other two. "You let Pedruchio make a little *habla* first . . ."

HE came on into the room, rolling the mumbling old Negress aside from his path with his foot. "You," he said, speaking in a savagely harsh voice to Girard Chevan. "You're the one. We've found your guns, and what few pennies you had kicking around. But there's one more thing we want before we go. The King's Ransom; you heard o' that? We want

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that; then we go. Then we can call all this a kind o' bum joke, and you can laugh, too. So, you tell Pedruchio, and Pedruchio, he stays just a nice boy . . ."

Girard Chevan lifted his head and looked for a moment into the eyes of the man standing above. "So you are crooks," he slowly said, "thieves, and you want us, any of us, to tell you anything?"

"*Si*," Ripa said. "Right; we're crooks, and we want any o' you here to tell us one thing."

Girard Chevan set back his head and laughed at him. "Look at me," he said, "keep on looking at me until you know that I will not ever tell you, or any man like you, anything."

Pedruchio Ripa watched him until his own glance faltered, and then he cursed him, turned away and upon the old woman, Madame 'Zele. He kicked and prodded her, spoke to her in English and bad French, a few crude words of Creole, but she lay staring at him blankly and cursing at him in a voice whose words were indistinct but terrible. "Ah, let 'er be!" Murchey said finally from the doorway. "Even if she squealed, you couldn't savvy it. She's more than half nuts, anyhow. Try them two babes in the corner, there; try *ma'mselle*."

But Burt James was out in the middle of the room before the heavily set Venezuelan had gone more than three paces towards the girl. "Listen," he said thickly, "don't touch her—don't touch her, Ripa! Let her be! You hear me? Let her be!"

Ripa stared at him, then laughed at him, shoved him in the face with an open-handed blow. "So you care for the little *chiquita*, huh? You and her are in together in these deal, against the old man? So, that's all right; you're both stupid . . . But, stupid, somebody's got to tell me. That don't matter who. You can do it; I see to that. Come on, tell nice ol' Pedruchio—"

His hand went out as he spoke, caught at James's shoulder and the splayed fingers tore fiercely into the flesh and muscle. "You remember—you remember last night, what I didn't have time to finish, hey, baby? So, tell papa now, before papa hurts bad."

Burt James was trembling all over. His lips worked so that it was difficult for him to speak. "Don't," he said. His voice was nearly a screamed sound. "I had enough of that last night—"

Ripa hit him open-handed, knocked him down, kicked him when he got him there. In the passage, Hedges and Murchey laughed with the Venezuelan and Hedges said, "So you can't take it, chappie? And you're the guy, last night, who asked us back. Give it to 'im, Ripa; boot 'im!"

Ripa held his great foot in its pointed boot back. "We don't want t' hurt him so he can't talk," he said. "You goin' t' talk, baby?"

Sobs were rising from Burt James's throat, the sobs of a broken and uncontrolled man. "Yes," he muttered up. "I will. But just keep your hands off me, and your feet. And I'll show you; I'll tell you . . ."

Ripa dragged him staggering up, ripped the bonds from his hands, whirled him out into the passage when Hedges and Murchey had stood back. "Show us," Ripa said, his hand caught tightly in the American's jacket collar. "You don't, I break your fingers, just like candy sticks. Which way?"

"Down," Burt James muttered. "Down in the old cellars." He gazed obliquely back as he spoke, as if looking into Ripa's face in pleading.

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Hedges, he saw, and the other man, Murchey, walked side by side now and quite gayly, and if Murchey carried a pistol it was not in evidence and easily to be reached, and the little Englishman had lowered the Thompson gun to his side, seemed all but forgetful of it.

"It's big, this ransom, baby?" Ripa said, shoving him ahead as he turned his electric torch beam along the darkness of the winding, descending passage.

"Yes," Burt James muttered. "It's so big, it'll take all three of you to handle it, and you're all pretty strong men . . ."

CHAPTER VII.

THE RANSOM.

THEY stood in a group at the bottom of the last flight of slimy steps, James in the middle, the muzzle of the Thompson gun pressed against his chest by Hedges, the light of the electric lanterns directed into his sweating face.

"Where now, mug?" Hedges croaked at him. "This is as far down as it goes . . . You said the bottom."

"Yes," James said. He was gaping stupidly in the powerful lights. "I said the bottom. But"—he pronounced the words very slowly, the idea, the plan, already organized and detailed in his brain—"I'm goofy, with the beating you've been giving me; I'm almost lost. Where's that *Vodou* temple and altar? The stuff is behind the altar."

"If you're lying," said Ripa, "we'll kill you very slowly, baby. You, and your girl."

"I'm not lying," James said. "Look behind that altar." Then he just stood there, laxly, waiting for them.

They moved, they dragged him with them, shoving on down the narrow passage, talking in thick, eager voices to each other, swinging the rays of their lanterns over old cell doors where the iron of the bars had long ago rusted away in this perpetual damp, at last turning in through a low but wide doorway where, recently, the thick panels of a door had been smashed through.

The room they walked into was low, wide and long. Once, it perhaps had been used as the main dungeon of the castle, but its purposes were not those now. This had become a holy place of the black religion, a *houmfort*, a temple of the *Vodou*. Upon the dark stone of the walls black hands had crudely but strongly drawn the designs and symbols of the saints, the gods of the *Vodou*—the fabled and feared Legba, Domballa, Ougou and Agomme, a score more. And against the far wall was the altar, the center, the heart of the black religion. Crude crosses were there, gruesome little reproductions of human heads made in wax and in lead, mysterious and holy symbols whose significance none of them there fully understood.

But, half a dozen paces from that place, Ripa and Hedges who led stopped, and stared around at him, Burt James. "Behind there?" Ripa said. "The altar?"

"Look there," James said in a low, quiet voice. He, too, advanced slowly as he spoke, the thought burning in his mind that if their treasure was not here, his, also, might not be, but that still this somehow was the end of the road for all of them.

Ripa and Hedges had hold of the altar table now, kicked and shoved it aside, stepped on behind it, right to the scrawled and painted wall carrying the designs of the gods. Their fingers ran

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along that cold and wet stone, seeking for cracks, some secret opening and a hidden panel. It was Hedges who found it, let forth a little, laughing, hoarse cry of triumph. " 'Ere!" he said. " Give me that machete, Pedruch'!"

Staring, silent, the Venezuelan handed the big-bladed knife to him. Where his sensitively searching fingers had been, Hedges set the point of the blade, turned it hard, and a scale of plaster, the same color and configuration as the wall stone, slid down, and for that moment all held by one thought and fascination, the four stared at the small, cleverly executed crevice behind. " Press against, *bobo!*" hissed Ripa, his big, fat hands trembling out. " Open it!"

Hedges pressed against it, and through the room was a low, slow grinding sound of stone moving against stone. One whole section of the wall was moving, swinging in, opening, letting the rays of the torches lick forward into what James knew had been for at least a century complete darkness.

IT was not the faint and weird sounds that warned him, it was some strange instinct, or remembrance of knowledge of the black religions, and of some of the implied statements in those old records of the first Chevan in Yucatan! " The serpents!" he yelled at Hedges. " Watch the serpents! They left them there to guard it!"

But Hedges had already seen the hooded, whitish, writhing things and sprung back, his lips and his eyes pale, his voice a muffled, choking scream. Then Ripa's laughter boomed through the room, echoed from the low ceiling and the walls. " Serpents—sure!" he said. " But blind. Look! They been in dark so long they can't see . . ."

He turned his electric torch's rays fully inwards now, upon the scaled, dull and sightless eyes of the two swaying serpents, and Hedges laughed with him, and the man named Murchey. " We kill 'em with the machete," Ripa said. " We let baby kill 'em; he tells us about 'em. Now, look behind—see there! Take a good look; there's another serpent. But that fella, he don't bite. His eyes is emeralds, and his back is diamonds, and his tail, that's solid silver and gold. So we—"

Ripa had time to turn and leap away, paw for his gun in his jacket pocket. But, stepping, wheeling sidewise, striking from below the knee, Burt James had struck the man named Murchey square in the mouth, knocked him spinning down, leapt then on Hedges, the clubbed sub-machine gun in his hands. The little Englishman was quick, and he had just seen precious stones and metals close before him; he leapt back from the blow of that gun, hacked swiftly in with the machete. Burt James took the blow grinding and shuddering along the barrel of the Thompson gun, reversed the piece in his hands and, all his weight behind it, gave Hedges the steel-plated butt in the chin and throat.

The first of Ripa's bullets winged cracking past his shoulder as he turned from doing that, and he dropped flat to the floor, pawing at the unfamiliar mechanism of the Thompson gun. He had freed the safety catch, he was ripping his first burst across the room when he heard Ripa's yell to Murchey, saw the other man lurch out on his hands and knees, kick over and smash the one remaining electric torch burning in the room.

In that darkness, the only light was the blue, stabbing flashes of the guns, and James fired and aimed by them,

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cool, shrewd, deliberate now, possessed of a knowledge that was dominant all through him that at last he was winning, would win. He crawled forward across that floor, waiting for them to shoot, to give a target, then winging his bursts of lead at them, flailing the stone walls and floors, twice hearing them cry out in pain, and then, from the passage and the stairs outside, the sounds of other voices and guns. He stopped shooting then; he reached out with one hand in the gun-lashed darkness to find the discarded electric torch, to see his enemies or his new allies or foes. He found the lantern, the little button which controlled it, turned it on, his palm cupped across the lens. The light so given was dull and opaque, filled the room indirectly and incompletely.

A TALL man stood in the low doorway of the room, Girard Chevan, King of Le Berceau, the rope which had bound him still hanging from one hand, a huge old pistol gripped in the other. Firing steadily, calling out in a high and strong voice of command, he was advancing forth into the room. At once, at him, the man who blocked their way from here, Ripa and the man named Murchey turned and fired. Their bullets caught Girard Chevan waist high. He stumbled, he twisted aside and went down, then came to his knees, still grasping his gun, still attempting to fire and to protect all that was his and that he considered sacred.

But then his daughter, Helene Chevan, was beside him and in front of him, was stooping down to shield him and to take the gun from his hand. A kind of croaked laugh came from Ripa's blood-creased mouth and he rose slowly stumbling to his feet, steadied himself and the gun he held in his hand, started to take certain aim.

Burt James killed him as he stood like that, chopped him down with a burst of a score of bullets, then went forward, kicking aside the lantern, lashing out with the last of his bullets at the third man, Murchey, crouched in a corner, crawling shooting towards the door. Murchey lived after James got to him; he was still trying to make the door, fumbling up fresh cartridges into his pistol clip, and James gave him the barrel and the butt of the Thompson gun before he at last lay still.

Blacks, a screaming, milling horde of them, had jammed the doorway behind Helene Chevan. They held knives, clubs, old muskets and torches in their hands. They were into the room and springing upon the unconscious body of Hedges and upon Burt James, the other white man whom they believed to have defiled their temple, when Helene Chevan stopped them. She spoke to them and drove them back as she would children. In a voice which rang with command and would not allow itself to contain sorrow, she told them to go and pick up the body of the man who was her father, and their king.

When they had gone, all but a pair of them who stood watch at the door at her command, torches held above their heads, she came forward to where Burt James stood. "It's over," she said to him. "It's all over now, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, reaching out his hands to her. "It's all over now, Helene; all through . . . You—"

"—No," she said. "I'm all right. I can't weep, not yet. Because he had to die, sometime, somehow, and, somehow, this had to come to an end. It couldn't have gone on. It's—it's just as

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well he died here, like this, protecting all he loved and revered and believed in; he was the high priest, you know. He, and that old woman, 'Zele . . . But, your serpent is there, the sacred, precious serpent?"

"Yes, it's there. But, not mine; yours."

SHE tried to smile at him, her hand out on his shoulder. "What's mine is yours, from now on, Burt James.

"Because I want no more of this place, or anything in it. I want never to see it, or hear of it again. These things I will tell you, though: Some of the blacks got in from outside and freed us, in that room. They'd been held by the crew of Murchey's schooner. Murchey was a bootlegger and a smuggler who operated between Haiti and San Domingo and Puerto Rico.

"Hedges and that other man you killed must have got in touch with him over in Haiti yesterday; the lieutenant's uniform and the faked papers, I guess, were all just common tricks of his trade.

"They worked pretty well—well enough," she added.

"Come out of here," he suddenly demanded. "Right now. And don't say another word."

"No. I'll wait. Until those two boys get your friend, Hedges, out of here; he's the one who will tell the *gendarmes,* the real *gendarmes,* what they'll want to know when they come. And, get your serpent, Burt James; bring it with you."

"Listen," he said, his hands taking her hands, "am I right, right at all, when I think you love me—or might love me?"

Calmly, able to smile just a little now, she looked deeply into his probing eyes.

"Yes, you are."

"And you'll marry me, when we get North, get over to Haiti, any place out of here?"

"Yes; yes, I will. But, the king's daughter no longer wants the King's Ransom. Take it with you. Take it to your museum and leave it there. That's where it belongs, and no other place. Then I'll marry you, Burt James, and then for the first time in my life I'll feel really free . . ."

From the floor he picked up the Thompson gun, went with it to that wall aperture, the light from the torches against his back. The sightless and white serpents writhed away and hissed at him, but he caught them, flipped them against the stone and killed them with the gun stock; then, his breath held short, reached in and grasped the sacred and bejewelled serpent from its resting place, let his eyes glance across its slender, exquisitely wrought length for a moment, then slipped it beneath his jacket and went back to her.

She was standing by the doorway motionlessly, waiting for him, turned then and walked at his side from that room.

Once, while they mounted the steps side by side and she stumbled a little bit in her weariness and his arm went out around her to steady her, she looked up into his face and said, in a burst of confidence:

"I've been waiting ever since I can remember, for some man like you to come and ransom me."

Burt James did not know any answer; he just stopped right there and kissed her.

THE END

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No Fighting Man

Novelette—Complete

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

Author of "The Terror," "Hideaway Island," etc.

"I'd hate to blow your belt buckle through your backbone, but I'll do it!"

Pilot Grant Avery, accused of smuggling dope in his Havana-Miami plane, flies into the face of trouble to clear his name

CHAPTER I.

SMUGGLED DOPE.

GRANT AVERY, sitting comfortably back in his pilot's seat, was feeling pretty good about life. From where I stood behind him at the engine panel, I could tell that on account of the way his blue and white uniform cap was cocked over his left ear.

When he was feeling just so-so, that cap was always set straight on his curly red head, and when he was sore about something, or when we were racing around the edges of a Caribbean hurricane, it would be pulled low over his eyes, which would be as hard and as coldly blue as marble chips.

So it was a pretty good barometer, that cap, and when it was pulled low in front, all of us who rode the big flying boat Haiti, the co-pilot, the radio op, the steward and myself, the engineer, would step on tiptoes and talk in low, careful whispers.

It was an afternoon fine enough to make anybody feel good. We were eating up the last twenty miles of our run up from Havana. All our passengers were safe and sound, thanks to Grant, in spite of the fact that the rebels had turned machine guns at us when we had taken off from Havana Harbor.

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And best of all, it was the first of the month, and the paymaster would confer his cash blessing upon us when we appeared at his window shortly after landing. Yes, it was a pretty fine afternoon, especially for Grant Avery. Today he would draw down his first check as senior pilot of the Caribbean Division, which had a sizeable boost in pay, even for a guy whose flying time had been highest on the line for the past five years.

"Nice flying, kid," Grant said to young Jimmie Davis, who was making his first run with us as co-pilot. Of course, Jimmie would have been considered a veteran on some lines, with his two thousand flying hours safe in his log book; but on the Trans-Caribbean, a mug wasn't supposed to know a brace wire from a longeron until he had run up at least that many hours. That was why the line was what it was.

"I couldn't have held closer to the course myself, Jimmie," Grant said.

The kid flushed, pretty tickled that the big boy had let him touch the wheel at all on his first trip. But that was Grant's way. He always gave the other fellow a break.

"Here's a message from the operations manager," said Pete Newcomb, the radio operator, handing Grant a slip of paper.

"That's a funny one," Grant said, scratching his red head. "Wants me to stay aboard after we land. Wants to see me—here. What's the big idea? Some day I'm going to—"

Remembering Jimmie, he shut up. He pulled his cap far down over his blue eyes, and by that, of course, I knew he was sore. I could have finished his sentence for him. Some day he would do it, too. He would get Mr. Swasey, the operations manager, a long way from the air terminal, and he'd push Mr. Swasey's front teeth through his back hair.

"Listen, Flipper," he called to me over his shoulder. "Do me a favor, huh?"

"What favor?" I asked him, cutting the left wing tank in on the main fuel line.

"While I'm waiting to see what Swasey wants, get one of the mechs to warm my ship up, will you? I've got a date to-night at West Palm Beach, and I want to hop just as soon as I draw my pay."

SAND Key slid past our left wing tip and the lighthouse sped astern on the other side. There was a west wind, and heat bumps from the land began to slap at the big ship. Grant took the controls to ease the motion of the plane for the passengers.

The Everglades, low, dun-colored, misty, began to appear to the westward, a flat expanse of nothingness that seemed to stretch all the way to the end of the world. The big hotels of Miami Beach and of Miami itself pushed up out of the sea straight ahead.

The four snarling engines which were my particular charge ate up the distance in great hungry gulps, and Grant began to throttle down, cutting his altitude as we swept across the sandy keys which separated Biscayne Bay from the Atlantic.

I didn't even watch the landing. I was busy with the engine instruments, and when you had seen one of Grant's landings you had seen them all. As soon figure on the Macon doing a loop as Grant making a rough landing. I heard the hammering of the water against the mammoth keel and knew we were on the surface. Grant taxied

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up to the landing float and the stewards began to flock around to carry the luggage into the customs office. Me, I eased up on the dock, leaving the engines to idle down their heat.

Grant's sweet little amphibian was stored in the north hangar. I got the hangar chief to give me a couple of men and we rolled it down into the water. I got the Hornet started and watched the gages for a moment. I called a mechanic and told him to stand by while she warmed up. Then I walked back to the landing dock. It was about that time I began to notice that there was something wrong.

Mr. Swasey was standing on the landing dock, waiting for the last of the baggage to follow the passengers into the building. Mr. Brent, superintendent of the Caribbean Division, was standing beside him too. But that was not all.

Three Coast Guard officers from the C. G. hangars north of us were standing there with Mr. Swasey and Mr. Brent, and there was a curiously alert expression on their faces that made me feel sort of funny inside.

The last of the baggage came out. The steward came ashore. Mr. Swasey cleared his throat and looked at Grant, who was still sitting there in the bird cage, waiting for orders.

"Avery," he said, "come up here, will you?"

Grant's cap was straight down over his eyes and he was both puzzled and sore. Knowing him, I could tell. He came out of the bird cage and marched up the gangway, a tall, solid figure in his blue-and-white uniform. His weather-stained face was down over a cigarette and the sunlight beat down on it at an angle that brought out the leanness of it and the long, clean line of his jaw.

He inhaled deeply and blew a long, thin line of smoke from his tight lips. "What's it all about?" he asked.

Mr. Brent was looking troubled. Mr. Swasey was too, but there was a nameless something in his expression that wasn't exactly trouble—for himself.

"We just thought," said Mr. Swasey evenly, "that you'd better stand by while these officers glanced about your ship. Of course I know there's nothing in it, but still—"

His voice trailed away. He looked at a Coast Guard lieutenant and nodded. The three officers went aboard. They began to search for something, beginning at the cockpit and working their way back through the cabin into the lazarette.

"If anybody lost a bass drum or something," said Grant sardonically, "why not confide in me?"

His voice was light, but his gray eyes were squinting coldly through his cigarette smoke. Little muscles had hardened around his mouth and he looked as if he would like a good brawl. But Mr. Brent was standing there, and even Mr. Swasey was his superior officer. He had been, ever since the shake-up six months ago, when Grant had come so near to getting fired.

ONE of the Coast Guard officers clambered up through the hatch and appeared on the wing top. He looked around for a minute or two, then suddenly bent over and began to work at something. I knew what it was. It was the big zippered triangle in the wing where life preservers are kept for use in case the ship began to crack up at sea after an emergency landing. He pulled at the zipper and lifted the flap. Then he straightened up and looked queerly at us.

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"Here it is," he said quietly.

For no reason at all, my heart began to pound, and I moved up beside Grant. My throat was so dry I had trouble swallowing. Mr. Brent looked at Mr. Swasey and his face was very white. Mr. Swasey's face looked queer and somehow I found myself hating that bird more than I had ever hated him before, which was saying quite a lot.

And Grant—well, he just stood there, smoking and watching the officers up on the big wing. All three were there now and they began to drag little tin boxes out of the life preserver locker until they had about a dozen.

"Know anything about that, flipper?" Grant asked me.

"No. They weren't in there at two o'clock, because I inspected the life preservers myself."

The Coast Guarders went down the hatchway into the ship. Grant looked at Mr. Brent.

"Now they've pulled the rabbit out of the silk hat," he said, "is there any use in my sticking around?"

Mr. Brent was a decent guy. I was surprised at the expression in his eyes as he looked at Grant. You'd have thought Grant had just lifted the boss's watch.

"I'm very sorry, Avery," he said, and I remembered that he used to call the big boy by his first name. "You'd better wait."

"Wait for what?"

Mr. Brent's voice cracked down hard. "Just wait!"

"Listen, Mr. Brent," I said, "whatever prize package you found up there isn't the pilot's worry—it's the engineer officer's. I'm supposed to check—"

"You're telling me?" snapped Mr. Brent.

I didn't know what was wrong, but I knew something terrible was going to happen.

"Yeah," I said desperately, "I'm telling you."

"Stick around," Mr. Swasey said in a nasty voice.

"Sure," I said, wanting to take a swing at him.

"Shut up, mug," Grant told me, so I shut up.

THE three Coast Guard officers came up the gangway, carrying tin boxes. Their faces were very grave. They put the boxes on the deck. A two-striper opened them. I couldn't see what was in them, but Mr. Brent and Mr. Swasey crowded around.

Grant pitched his butt into the water.

"See?" Mr. Swasey said to Mr. Brent, and whatever it was, he was pretty tickled about it. "I told you that tip from Havana was on the level. Now do you believe it?"

"Maybe," Grant drawled, "it's about time you let me in on the secret."

The senior officer of the Coast Guard spun around.

"You're under arrest," he said in his official voice, "for smuggling drugs."

"It's an outrage!" exclaimed Mr. Swasey. "This has been going on for six months, apparently. And you one of our oldest pilots! You're a rotten, double crossing—"

"Easy," Grant said. "Don't say anything you can't back up, or I'll take you to pieces with my own bare hands."

"I'm sorry, Avery," Mr. Brent said soberly. "But I'm afraid we *can* back it up. We've known the stuff's been coming in, but I couldn't believe you

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were in on it until I saw it with my own eyes."

"Mr. Brent," Grant said, "I've been flying with the line for five years. In that time I could have smuggled in a million dollars' worth of diamonds, one at a time, in my vest pocket. You ought to know me pretty well. Do you believe I'd smuggle dope?"

"I *have* to believe it," Mr. Brent said. "Mr. Swasey has shown me the proofs."

Grant looked at the operations manager and for a moment there was cold murder in his eyes. It was all as unreal as a motion picture to me, who knew Grant pretty well. Oh, the usual sounds were going on—everything around us seemed real enough. We could hear the talking of the passengers in the immigration office, and the sputtering of my four big radials on the Haiti's wing, and behind us the steady drone of Grant's own motor, warming up on his amphibian. Oddly, I found myself thinking that there would be no need to waste more gas on Grant's amphib. He wouldn't be using it now. I felt kind of sick to my stomach.

"What proof, Swasey?" Grant said in a voice that trembled with suppressed fury.

"Plenty!" the operations manager said. "I know who sold you the stuff at Havana, who stacked it up there in the wing, who—"

"Got a fine case, all fixed up and everything, eh?" Grant said. "Got me all tried and convicted, right here on the platform, haven't you?"

"Practically," said Mr. Swasey, and I'll swear the muscles around his mouth were twitching to hold back a grin.

"I'm not surprised at you, Swasey," Grant said.

He reached for a cigarette and his hand was steady, but there was a blue vein in his temple that throbbed and throbbed. I bent my knees a little, balanced on the balls of my feet, and waited.

He put the cigarette between his lips, but did not light it.

"So that, Mr. Brent," he said slowly, "is the loyalty I get in return for spending my best flying years with the line. Instead of defending me, of trying to prove I didn't do it, you've already convicted me in your own mind and will help to convict me in court. Have you considered the possibility that this louse, Swasey, who has hated me ever since I showed up his yellow stripe, has been trying to put me on the spot?

"No, of course not. I'm the sucker, the fall guy, and you're all ready to prove it. But if you think I'm going to take the fall for Swasey, you're all wet. Loyalty? Hell! And to hell with you and the line, too!"

He reached into his pocket slowly, and got out a box of matches. Every nerve in me twanged like overtaut harp strings. I knew it was coming.

"Let's go, Avery," said the senior Coast Guard officer.

GRANT pushed open the match box. As if that tiny motion released a trigger, he went into action like a Kansas tornado. His right fist swung up so fast I could not see it in motion. I heard it, though, as it crashed into the grinning face of Mr. Swasey. But almost before the dull chopping sound of that terrific blow reached my ears Grant had grabbed the falling man by the shoulder, had swung him around and pushed him against the three Coast Guardsmen, who were standing over their precious tin boxes.

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It all happened in the tiniest fraction of a second.

One of the officers stepped clear. I hit him and he fell. And then Grant, who had not seen me clip the Coast Guardsman, swung around and was away like a racing whippet, heading straight toward his idling plane. Before I had a chance to think, my own feet were carrying me after him. He was thirty steps ahead as we tore across the concrete apron. There was a lot of noise all at once. Shouts, yells, confusion. No time to look back, to look anywhere but just ahead. There was just one little segment of world left—the narrow strip of concrete which lay between me and the idling amphibian there at the water's edge.

"Stand aside!" somebody yelled.

"Don't shoot!" That would be Mr. Brent's voice. "Too many people!"

The muscles of my spine were crawling in expectation of the lethal shock of a bullet. My breath was tearing through my throat and red and blue spots danced in my eyes. Funny, the things you can think about at a time like that. I was remembering that I wouldn't get my pay check now and that I had less than four dollars in my kick.

Vaguely I saw Grant's fist flick out at a mechanic who was trying to prevent him from clambering into the cabin of his plane. The mechanic plunged backward into knee-deep water. Grant dived into the cabin, slipped into his seat and slammed his hand against the throttle.

My own hands grabbed the cowling just as the powerful little ship hitched ahead on its keel. Before I could pull myself up, it was forging ahead in the deepening water. My feet were swept aside. With the strength of desperation I held on. Something smacked into the mahogany hull just an inch or two to the left of my head. It put strength into my muscles. I went over that cowling like a squirrel up a tree trunk.

I looked at Grant. His eyes were terrible. Then I noticed that he was controlling the ship with his left hand on the wheel. His right hand was dragging a .45 out of the panel locker. He was shouting at me, but so great was the din I couldn't hear what he was saying. I didn't care much, either. Things were happening beyond the importance of mere talk.

Then I was staring into the unblinking eye of the big automatic. He, Grant, was pointing that thing at me! Well, if he wanted to shoot me, he could damn well do it. I flopped head-first into the cockpit, righted myself and sat down beside him. We were on our step, skimming across the placid Biscayne Bay. I looked down at the gun, and then I looked at Grant's terrible eyes. The gun dropped into his lap. By the time I could look back at the Air Terminal, we had vaulted into the darkening eastern sky and were zooming at an angle that I thought must end in a spin. But it didn't worry me. My own world had gone so topsy-turvy in the past few minutes that nothing seemed to matter.

CHAPTER II.

TO HAVANA.

I COULDN'T speak. I was trying to catch my breath, trying to figure out what it was all about. I looked instinctively at the instrument panel. Queer, how a mug's habits will get the best of him. I was out of a job, running away from I knew not what, bound for hell or beyond, and still I

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was interested in the messages indicated by the friendly round faces of the gages and dials before me. Revolutions too high. I motioned for Grant to cut down on the throttle, but he, who was usually so solicitous of his engines, left her to run at ruinous speed. Oil pressure oke, temperature likewise. Air speed high—169 miles an hour. Was I studying these things to take my mind away from the hurricane of violence, of emotion, which had blown me away from familiar moorings? I didn't know.

We banked crazily and screamed southward over the water. The shore line gradually swung in toward our course. At Cutler it slipped under our keel and we were roaring straight down along the line of the railroad. I glanced at the compass. Two hundred and fourteen degrees magnetic! The old course. Didn't Grant realize that he was through flying the Havana run?

A long, dark smudge was racing across the sea to the eastward. In some surprise I looked to the west. The sun had dived beneath the hard black rim of the Everglades and we were flying in the wild dark colors of the afterglow.

I looked at Grant. The gun was still on his knees. His eyes looked as if he had been squinting into the nethermost pits of hell. He leaned over and yelled in my ear.

"What did you come for?"

I shrugged, because I didn't rightly know. And anyway, what I had in my mind wouldn't go into words. How would you start telling a man that if, for five long years, you had sort of looked up to him, and liked him better than any mug you had ever known, and flown with him through all kinds of weather, you couldn't just let him go away without a friend in the world when the breaks ran against him? No, it sounded goofy, but there it was.

"Why," he demanded roughly, "did you come?"

I shrugged, looking back to see if the Coast Guarders had broken out one of their big patrol planes. But if they had, it was not within sight. I remembered that all their ships had been secured in the Coast Guard hangar when the ruckus started. It would take twenty minutes, at least, to put one of them in the air. And once started, I was certain that this little amphibian of Grant's had a slight edge on them in speed.

"Turn on the radio, Flipper," Grant said presently.

I did. It was a small affair, like those they put on automobile instrument boards. The chief radio man at the Air Terminal, who thought a lot of Grant, had boosted the amplification and added a short wave gimmick to it that gave us the low wave lengths. When the windows were closed to muffle the thunder of the engine, we could hear pretty well from the speaker box. Grant had learned code in the old days when he had been flying Contract Mail Route One, from Chicago to St. Louis, and I had learned it when a mechanic had to be radio op, co-pilot and wet nurse to passengers, all at the same time.

NOW I tuned in the Coast Guard station at Miami, and we got an earful. Commander Coffin was warning all ships and stations in southern waters to watch for us. Somehow it gave me the willies to think of the cutters, patrol boats and planes all being ordered to bring in, if possible, the persons of Grant Avery and Peter McGrew, otherwise known as Flipper, on

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account of the way my ears stuck out. It had all seemed perfectly reasonable to go helling off with the big boy when he had run amok there at the Air Terminal, but now — well, to hear ourselves being described as dope smugglers, fugitives from justice, and probably desperate, was something a little extra and it curled my toes up inside my shoes.

We tuned in on the Trans-Caribbean private radio system, too, and we heard plenty there. Miami was notifying Havana that we were southward-bound, perhaps to make contact with our "confederates" at Havana. The manager of the Havana terminal was to file complaint against us with the Cuban authorities and to have us arrested for extradition to the States.

But the return message from Lyman, Cuban manager, was illuminating. He would watch for us, he said, and if we landed in Havana Harbor he had no doubt he could find officers to make the arrest. But the revolutionary riots were spreading all over Havana and rumor had it that the entire western end of the island was aflame with revolution. From the terminal he could hear the rattle of machine guns and could see the sky red with fire in several places. Americans, he added, were exceedingly unpopular at the moment and some concern was felt by the government for the safety of American lives and property. He was not, he said, enthusiastic about the chances of interesting the government at this moment in a widespread search for us. Later, perhaps—

"There," said Grant, "is a break!"

"Yeah? Me, I didn't like the sound of those bullets we ducked this afternoon."

He swung around and looked at me. There were new hard lines running from his nose to the corners of his turned-down mouth, and his jaw muscles ridged his hard bronzed cheeks like strings under the skin.

"Want to get out?" he snapped. "I can land you on one of these keys and you can take the train back north."

"I'll play along," I said.

After quite a long time—just after we had cut across the Overseas Railway at Marathon Key, I leaned over to him.

"Did you do it, kid?" I asked him.

The plane swerved. His eyes, swiveling at me, were polished bits of blue agate.

"Do you want me to throw you to hell out of this ship?" he rasped.

"Did you do it?"

"No, of course I didn't, you damn fool!"

"That's all right, then," I said, feeling better.

HE yanked the plane back on her course. It was quite dark now. Over to the westward, there was still a pastel tint of color in the sky and in the flat apron of the Gulf of Mexico. Everywhere else it was black. Grant flipped on the instrument panel lights and in the reflected glow his face looked as if it had been chipped out of black and white marble.

"If you don't throttle down pretty soon," I said, "you're going to burn out the engine."

He did throttle down. The clamorous roar of the motor died to a decent volume, and we could talk without screaming our tonsils loose.

"What's the sense in going to Havana?" I asked him. "We'll be as popular there as a couple of wood pussies at a Sunday night church supper."

"I'm going to find out who put those

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tin boxes in that wing. I'm going to do that if I have to put my hand down somebody's throat and turn him inside out."

"Just a little good, clean fun!" I marveled. "You're going to lose your temper again and we're going to eat enough trouble to gag a buzzard!"

"Listen, Flipper," he said in a more reasonable voice. "Who went up on that wing while we were in port today?"

"Those spik mechanics, Manuel, Sanchez and José. And maybe fifty more while I had lunch. I wouldn't know."

"We'll find out," he said, grimly.

"Now, if you've cooled your fever down a little, let me ask you a question, huh? What did you pop off for back there at the Air Terminal? Why didn't you just stay there and tell them all to jump into the Bay? You could have fought your case and won."

"I'm not sure," he said. "You know that bird Swasey has hated me ever since that day, three years ago, when we were supposed to hurry all the ships from Miami to Havana. Remember, the Weather Bureau predicted a hurricane would hit us in a few hours?"

"I remember. I flew with you in the Jamaica. And was that a rough ride!"

"Do you remember that just before we hopped off, Swasey—he was senior pilot then—reported sick and some one else had to ferry the ship down?"

"Yeah. And he funked it. When we got back you called him yellow and hung one on his beezer."

"He's never forgotten that. Every day from then until now he's been watching for a chance to get me fired. And when the head office promoted me, instead of his yes-man, Ohstrom, to be senior pilot, he decided to get me. I know it."

I nodded. It is surprising the information you could pick up around the hangars by just keeping your face shut and listening. There were a lot of things I knew about Swasey that I wasn't sure even Grant knew. The matter of his playing roulette at the beach clubs three or four nights a week, for instance, and that business of the girl at Coral Gables. But Grant had enough on his mind now. No use talking things like that over when his thoughts must be milling around like a squirrel in a cage.

All of us of the grease gang knew that Swasey hated Grant and we were all praying that he wouldn't set the Haiti down in a rough landing in front of the Terminal, or be late to work, or anything.

None of the mechanics liked Swasey, or Ohstrom, either, and they all thought a heap of Grant, even if he did crack down pretty hard on them when they got careless around his ship. They could always go to him with a sob story and make a touch. He bailed a couple of them out when they got bunned down town. Any one of them would have slipped a century note to me for the privilege of being his engineer officer on the Haiti. And now here he was—his run of luck had come to an end at last. Maybe mine had, too, for that matter. But since Grant had given me most of the luck I ever had, I figured I'd share with him any I might have saved up.

CHAPTER III.

A BOLD MOVE.

EVEN before we picked up the flashing white light atop Morro Castle, we saw the dull red glow of conflagrations painted pinkly against

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the sky. It seemed, at a distance of twenty miles, as if the entire city must be ablaze. We tried to tune in the broadcasting stations in Havana, but neither was on the air. We turned to the Trans-Caribbean wave length, but that, too, was silent. We finally picked up a code message from the British passenger liner Orduña, bound from Valparaiso to Liverpool, and now at anchor in Havana Harbor. She was informing her sister ship, Orbita, southbound, that it was still safe to enter the port. Mobs, said her captain, were running loose in the streets, buildings were being fired and it was unwise to permit passengers to go ashore.

Our spinning propeller ate up the distance between us and the tumultuous city. Lights appeared, pale and feeble compared to the geysers of vivid scarlet which poured up from three places in the heart of town. Long swaths of ruddy water made ribbons ahead of us, guiding us straight toward the city itself.

"Better not land in the harbor," I said. "They'll be waiting for us with love and kisses."

"They'll be too busy," Grant snapped. "Look at that town. Think they're worried about us?"

We roared straight toward the O'Donnell light on Morro Castle. From two thousand feet we could almost look down the full length of Paseo de Marti. Crowds were surging back and forth on both sides of the Presidential Palace, but it was apparent that they were held back by troops. Etched in a black and white vignette by the street lights, it did not look like a revolution —did not look serious, somehow, until we could see tiny dots lying about the streets and red pin-pricks of flame that leaped from the crowds. One big fire was over by the Orphan Asylum, another somewhere back of the National Theater. The third was down by the docks. It made the eastern half of the great harbor look like a vast pool of fresh blood. We flew over the Trans-Caribbean Air Terminal and we saw something that made our pulses leap. The big Trinidad, the relief ship held at Havana, was on the apron warming up, although there was no scheduled flight until the next day. The half-dozen mechanics of the terminal were running back and forth like ants, all very busy about something and in a tremendous hurry, too.

To my astonishment, Grant cut his engine and swung straight down toward the ruddy water in front of the ramp. It was, according to my own opinion, the last place in the world for us to land. Talk about spitting in a wildcat's face! The scent of trouble was strong in my nostrils and I was getting lower and lower in my mind.

"How about giving her the gun," I called, "and beating it across to Merida? We could hide out along the Mosquito Coast for a coupla years, if we had to, till all this trouble dies down."

"I'll put you aboard the Orduña, down there," snarled Grant, jerking his chin at a great, single-funneled liner anchored in the harbor, "if you want me to."

"Oh, well," I sighed hopelessly, "if you're plumb nuts, somebody has to look out for you."

THE ramp swung upward, but strangely enough nobody seemed interested in us. From what we had heard on the short wave I had expected a full reception committee, equipped with machine guns, to be looking for us. We skimmed across

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the bloody water and settled as easily as a seagull. When the whining of the wires and the fluttering of the prop had died away we could hear—from somewhere beyond the terminal and the dock buildings—the tac-tac-tac of machine guns, the heavy bark of automatics and the deep slam of rifles.

A fainter sound, and one inexpressibly horrible the first time you hear it, was the far-away screaming of a murder-lusting mob that came thinly to our ears. Battle, murder and sudden death were loose in Havana on that flame-lit night. But if Grant heard those horrid sounds, he made no sign. He taxied straight up to the Trans-Caribbean ramp. His little amphib looked like a mosquito beside the great Trinidad, sister ship to our Haiti.

Now we could see what the ground crew was doing. Men were running to the Trinidad with bundles and papers in their hands, piling the stuff within the big cabin and running back for more. Not one of the Cuban mechanics even looked at us and Grant and I climbed out of our cabin and stalked grimly up the concrete.

Ben Lyman, the manager, marched down to meet us. There was no friendliness in his eyes as he confronted us. Strangely, he wore a huge automatic in a leg holster, and I noticed that he kept his hand close to it as he approached.

"Hello, Ben," Grant said, quietly. "I know you've heard the dirt about us. Do you believe it?"

Once Ben Lyman had been a pilot. Now he had risen to one of the dozen most important ground jobs on the line. He had known Grant for five years.

"Sorry, Grant," he said, gravely. "I'd rather it would have happened to almost anybody but you."

"Do you believe it?"

Ben's eyes chilled. "Yeah," he said, slowly. "I have to. Brent and Swasey sent me the details. I hate to do this, Grant, but I'm going to put you under arrest and take you back to Miami. It may be illegal, almost kidnaping, but—"

He looked down, his face suddenly white. Grant's gun had appeared from nowhere and was pushed so deeply into Lyman's stomach that the man could hardly breathe.

"I'm sorry, too, Ben," Grant said. "I'd hate to blow your belt buckle through your backbone, but I'll do it if you so much as grunt."

Ben Lyman was no coward, but he knew Grant Avery. His eyes went slowly up to Grant's, and stayed there an instant. He took a long breath.

"All right, Grant," he said, quietly. "If you think it's going to get you anything—"

"Get that gun, Flipper," Grant snapped.

I got it, and the holster and the cartridge belt, too, and put them around my own waist. And I didn't feel very good about it, either.

Now the mechanics were beginning to pay attention. They stopped running back and forth with their packages and just stood, their eyes and teeth shining, watching us.

"LISTEN, Grant," Lyman said. "We've just had a telephone call from police headquarters that the mob that's been raising hell over by the dockyards is on its way here to loot this place and to kill us all. We helped Orilla and Mendez to escape yesterday and—"

"They can burn it to the ground, for all of me," Grant said. "I want you to call the three mechanics, Man-

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uel, Sancho and José, and have them come with us to the office. Tell the others to go on with their work and not to pay any attention to us. If you double cross me, I'll give you the business."

The mechanics were beginning to work their way toward us in a way that meant they were going to try to give us a quick rush. I waved my gun at them.

"*Vamos,* you," I told them, adding a bit of idiomatic Spanish to flavor my words. "You want to see your boss's insides all over the ramp, mixed with your own? Get to work."

They faltered. They looked at Ben Lyman. Grant gave a little push with his automatic. There was a nasty smile on his mouth. Ben Lyman looked at Grant, then turned to the crowd.

"It's all right, *hombres.* Go on with your work. Manuel, Sanchez and José, come with us to the office."

The three hesitated and glanced uncertainly toward the barbed wire enclosure which Lyman had built around the terminal when the first trouble came, several months ago. Usually police guarded the locked gates. Now there were three or four of the ground crew patrolling the fence. I wondered where the cops were. Fighting the mobs, I supposed. If so, they had plenty to do to keep themselves busy. The sound of shooting and of yelling was getting closer and closer all the time. I had a heavy, cold feeling at the pit of my stomach. Looked to me as if, despite our momentary advantage, we had jumped merrily from the frying pan into the fire. I was ready to call it an evening's fun and to go away from here.

"Manuel!" Ben Lyman called. "Sanchez! José! Come with us."

I located them in the crowd of goggling mechanics. They seemed to be trying to ease away. I went up to them and made my face into an ugly knot. I pointed by gun at them, waving it back and forth. I was getting pretty nervous and I suppose if they had tried to beat it, I'd have given it to them; I was that jumpy. They looked at me and then they came right along. The queer thing about it all was that although we were right on the edge of a tailspin ourselves, and I was expecting somebody to crack down on us at any minute, I was acutely aware of the growing noise from the distance—the sound of the firing and the yelling from the mob. You know how it is in a long rainstorm that gets on your nerves? No matter what else may be happening, you are conscious all the time of the steady fall of the rain. That was the way it was with me. I kept telling myself that if something didn't happen soon I would be calling for paper dolls to cut.

WE were in the operations office. It was hot and close. Grant had sat Ben Lyman down at the desk and was standing over him, his face twisted into a grimace that was supposed to be a grin. The three mechanics were standing along the wall, and I was holding the cannon on them, getting more and more ready to give them the business just because I was so hot and scared and upset in my mind. I had had enough of all this helling around and I didn't care who knew it. I was no fighting man; I was a practical engineering officer, and I could get all the trouble I wanted out of a balky Hornet.

"All right, Ben," Grant was saying in a taut, dangerous voice. "I was framed. I came down here to learn who framed me, and why."

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"Listen, Grant," said Ben Lyman, cocking an ear toward the noise that was coming in from the window. "This is a hell of a time for a huddle. We're trying to clear the money and the records and everything out of here before the mob comes in and sacks the place. They're sore at us because we flew some of their ex-presidents and things out to Miami and they're going to get even. We've had word from the Presidential Palace itself that the mobs are out of control and—"

"I don't care if they throw the terminal out into the Caribbean," Grant snarled. "Who put a dozen boxes of dope inside my wing this morning or early afternoon?"

Ben Lyman's eyes did not waver. "How would I know, Grant?" he asked.

"If you don't know that dope has been going out of here for six months, you ought to know!" said Grant, his chin stuck out. "And if you're expecting to live until morning, you'd damn well better help me find *out!*"

"So far as I know," said Ben Lyman, his eyes hot and angry, "you took the dope out yourself!"

Grant's temples throbbed and for a moment I thought he was going to give it to Lyman. Instead, he spun around like a top and grabbed the mechanic Manuel by the throat. He shook him until I thought the spik's teeth would be all over the floor.

JOSÉ'S right hand flashed behind him, came out holding something long, and pointed and shiny. My finger tightened on the trigger, but even as I took a step toward him I knew that I mustn't kill him—yet. It might kill evidence, too. So I smashed down on José's head with the under side of the automatic. He screamed and blood gushed down his face from a long cut in his scalp.

But spiks scream pretty easy, so I knew I hadn't spoiled him.

"Stand up there, louse," I told him, "or I'll do it again. And like doing it!"

He staggered back against the wall, dropped his knife and wiped his smeared face with the sleeve of his monkey suit. Grant hadn't even looked up. He was still shaking Manuel. And Ben Lyman's hand was slowly dragging down into his desk drawer. I gave him a look. Color came to his cheek and his hand popped into sight, empty.

"If I'd seen a gun in that hand, Mr. Lyman," I said, "I'd have shot the living heart out of you."

He looked at me kind of funny. "I really think you would, Flipper," he said, slowly. "And all the time I'd been thinking you were a peaceable sort of guy."

"I am," I snapped. "And I'd kill all four of you to get a little peace right now."

"All right, Manuel," Grant was saying. "Let's have it. You were on that top wing to-day. Did you put those boxes in?"

"*Por Dios, no, señor!*" The man's eyes were rolling as if they'd come loose from their hinges.

With deliberate savagery Grant slapped his face. Slapped it again and again, while Manuel's head bobbed back and forth like that on a rubber doll.

"Tell me!" Grant snarled. "Who did it? Quick, before I snap your neck bones!"

"Cut it out, Grant," said Lyman, "or I'll bust loose and you'll have to kill me, too."

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"Shut up!" I told him, and meant it.

Maybe I was the only one in the room who realized how that noise from outside was growing, but now every shout, every yell—and there were lots of them—was beating against my eardrums as if some one were thumping on the very drums of doom. I stood there, aching all over with some nameless fear, just wishing that I were anywhere in the whole world but here.

"Come on, kid," I said, "let's scram."

Grant didn't even hear me. "Your last chance, Manuel!" he said in a voice that was inexpressibly malevolent.

The Cuban met his eye and turned almost white.

"*Sí, señor,*" he whispered, "but it was Sanchez and José, who hid the little boxes in—"

But before he could finish his sentence, it came. I had known it would come. That had been why the little icicles had been forming on my spine. There was a crash and three quick shots from just beyond the office window and the yelling and howling of the mob grew in volume until it was a tidal wave of sound that was like the malignant scream of a Caribbean hurricane. The telephone bell shrilled and shrilled, but nobody noticed.

All four of us were motionless, suddenly, exactly in the positions we had been taking before that sound hit us. Ben Lyman, sitting upright at his desk, watching Grant, but with his head cocked sideways as if he were listening to the noise outside. Grant, frozen in the act of choking Manuel. Sanchez, flattened against the wall, staring at my gun with wide, frightened eyes. José, dabbing patiently at the trickles of blood which dripped steadily from his split scalp. Me, holding the gun on them, and being held myself by a fear which rotted my very bones. Did I say that I was no fighting man?

CHAPTER IV.

BLOOD LUST.

GRANT was the first to snap out of it. He took one step to the side, shot a quick look through the window. I looked over his shoulder. There was a mob at the barbed wire gates. One of the sentries was squirming in a puddle of blood beneath the flood lights. The other two were crouched behind an overturned baggage truck, aiming their guns at the mob. Did you ever see a mob that wanted blood? I don't suppose there's a more fearful sight in the world. As I looked, a big Negro pulled out of his pocket a pair of wire-cutters. His teeth and eyes glittered as he calmly clipped away the topmost strand of the barbed wire. There was a crimson and yellow spurt of flame from the baggage truck. The Negro dropped his pliers, pitched forward against the fence, which, as he fell, ripped his face from cheek to temple.

"That tears it!" said Grant. He turned to Ben Lyman. "Got any spare guns around?"

"Some of the police guns are in the immigration office. If we can hold them off until the Guard comes maybe we can save the station!"

"Stay close to me, spik!" I snarled at Manuel, who was easing toward the door. He looked at my gun, and at my trigger finger, which was quivering on the shining lever, and he lost his ambition to leave me. "Come on, you three," I said. "Just try to get away. Remember the *ley de fuega?*"

Then we were in the immigration of-

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fice, grabbing up the rifles that were stacked there by the Cuban army men who had been guarding the terminal. Mechanics raced in from outside, took guns and scattered to strategic positions. I stayed close to Grant, keeping my three little pets with me. I knew Grant would pull me to little pieces if I lost them. I did not intend to lose them.

I heard Ben Lyman telling somebody to start the big plane down the ramp and to moor it to a bollard. I heard him saying something about the pilot being marooned down town, but that did not seem important then. Nothing seemed important but that mob, which made a noise, now, like a million buzzing bees—a steady, humming murmur—as it herded outside the barbed wire. There was no more firing. Just that murmur.

Then, suddenly, the rush started. Somebody in the back of the crowd started to push. Standing there, fingering our guns as we watched, we could see the barbed wire bite into those who had been crowding against the fence. They screamed horribly, and when the fence fell, they fell with it, and must have been trampled flat by the mob.

"Let 'em have it, fellows!" Grant said, without looking at Ben Lyman.

We fired. The sound of our shots was followed, instantly, by more shots from the mechanics who were scattered around the hangars, the administration office and the passenger building. Men fell and were swallowed up by the mob which flowed, unbroken, over them. They were of all colors, from pure white to midnight black, in that crowd. They were dressed in everything from the dirty overalls of stevedores to white pongee and straw hats. They had but one thing in common. They wanted our hearts' blood and it looked very much as if they were going to get it. The baggage truck, with our two remaining sentries behind it, was blotted out in the mob, who ran over it as if it had not been there.

All this I saw across the sights of my rifles as I pumped bullets into a target I couldn't miss. But it didn't do any good. They kept right on coming. I happened to look sideways at José. He had his knife out again. He was licking his lips and tiptoeing toward Grant, who was too busy shooting at the mob to notice. There was no chance to yell at José. He couldn't have heard through the bedlam. No time to turn and stop that up-swinging arm. No chance to do anything but just to shoot him. So I did exactly that. In the stomach. If I'd had time, I'd have been good and sick. It was a lousy feeling, shooting a guy like that with your gun pushed into his belly. But I had come all this way to see that Grant got along all right, and I couldn't stand by while somebody ripped him open, could I?

THE mob got into the enclosure and scattered. Bullets were smacking through the window and beating up against the side of the building. It was surprising, how many of those birds had guns. Mostly they had knives and clubs, but there were enough who had guns—plenty. Sanchez, who, with Manuel, had been standing in the corner where I could keep an eye on them, clapped his hands to his face, squalled like a banshee and fell, rolling over and over. He went right on squalling.

"Shut up!" I told him, because his squalling did things to me.

He didn't shut up and I looked down at him. Seeing what a mess his face was, I decided to kill him myself when

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I got time, if he didn't die first. It wasn't any kindness to let him go on living with a face like that. But he died pretty soon, anyway.

"Lie down on the floor, Manuel," I told the only one of three who was left. He was Grant's only hope of getting straight with things, and I couldn't let him get killed. He was too scared to lie down. He just stood there, trembling. At that, he wasn't any scareder than I was—but I was a white man. You know? So I knocked him down and kicked him into the corner.

We didn't know what was happening anywhere else. Fighting there was, certainly, because we could hear shots and the sound of the mob raising hell over by the passenger window.

"I guess," Grant said, stopping to wing a bird who had been taking pot shots at me, "that you better get that plane going, Ben, if it isn't too late. So far, most of the mob is in front of us. That'll leave the ramp clear, maybe, for a few minutes."

Ben Lyman looked at him, but Grant was shooting again. A big mulatto came racing up to the window, swinging an automatic. Grant was reloading. I shoved my rifle out and hit the guy twice.

"What are you going to do, Grant?" Ben Lyman asked.

"May as well be here as anywhere," Grant said. "There's a reception committee waiting for me at Miami, remember. Go on. It's your duty to the line. Lord, isn't it a wheeze, my talking about duty to the line?"

His voice was bitter as he turned back to the window. Ben Lyman pulled his gun in from the window.

"I've got to protect the stuff I've got in the ship, Grant," he said in a queer voice. "And my men, too. Come on, old timer. I'll see that you get a square deal."

"Yeah?" Grant snarled. "All the square deal I'll get, I'll get myself. Beat it, Flipper. Go on with the ship. You're in the clear."

"Go to hell!" I snarled. "Anytime I want you to peek at my hole card, I'll ask you."

"Last chance," Ben Lyman said. "Coming?"

"Scram!" said Grant, not looking back from the window.

"I'll be seeing you," Ben Lyman said.

He left the room. The mob swung to the left. They appeared to be giving the administration building a going over now. We could breathe for a moment. Grant spun around. He looked at the two dead mechanics. He saw Manuel, sitting there with his back up against the corner.

"Watch this window a few minutes, Flipper!" he rasped. "Let me know if they head this way again."

WITH that, he raced across the room, scooped Manuel up by the lapels of his coat and swung him clear around. He plopped him down in the chair behind Ben Lyman's big desk. The reflected glare from the floodlights outside, mingled with the ruddy flicker from a big fire somewhere, gave plenty of light in the room. Manuel's face was a mottled gray and his eyes were popping out.

"All right, now," Grant said, grabbing a piece of paper and a pen from Ben Lyman's desk. "Write down what happened. Quick! I'll blow your head off if you don't work fast."

"*Si, señor!*" whimpered Manuel.

"Did you have a deal with Señor Swasey, of the Miami office, to smuggle drugs aboard our ships?"

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"No, *señor*. With Mr. Ohstrom."

"It's the same thing. Put that down. 'I was engaged by Señor Ohstrom to put drugs aboard the Miami-bound planes.'"

I heard a pen squiggling across the paper. Something terrible was happening over to the right of our window, but I couldn't see it. Somebody was screaming so that it tore at the roots of my heart. I saw one of the mobsters run back and I shot him just to get even with him for that noise.

"How long," Grant's relentless voice was going on, "have you been doing this for him? Six months? Write that down. 'For six months—'"

Six months? Funny, how things work out. Six months ago I thought Havana a grand place. I had loved it, even though I had long since learned that there wasn't really much romance in the tropics. It is hot in the tropics, and dusty, and the *caballeros* who twang guitars beneath balconied windows are begging for coppers, and the *señoritas* who sit behind the bars are mostly fat and have swell mustaches. But still I loved it. There was something about the way the moon sailed high over the pink buildings, something about the way Morro blinked solemnly across the harbor that—oh, I don't know. I'm not romantic, myself, I'm just a practical guy whose ears stick out and who has a way with motors. Yeah, I loved Havana. But here I was, in a fair way to die in Havana, and I lost my love all of a sudden. I hated Havana now, and I hated the whites and the blacks and the half-betweens who wanted to slit my glad young pipes for me.

"And when," Grant's hard voice was going on, "did you get the orders to put the boxes in the wing of the Haiti?"

"*Ayer, señor!*"

"Yesterday, huh? Señor Ohstrom came in from the Jamaica run? And listen, didn't Señor Swasey fly over on the early mail run yesterday and fly back to Miami on the Barbados?"

I snatched a look away from the window. Manuel's eyes were rolling wildly. He was drooling through twitching lips. He looked up at Grant as if he were staring into the eyes of the devil himself.

"*No, señor,*" he whimpered.

"Liar, tell me the truth or I'll break your yellow spine!"

"*Señor!*" Manuel bawled as Grant reached for him. "*Verdad,* Señor Swasey came on the eleven o'clock. He was here! No, let me alone, *por amor de Dios!* He told me if I told anybody about him and the boxes he would betray me to the *guardia!* He told me to have the boxes ready for your sheep—ship—and—"

"They're coming again, big boy!" I called, hastily. "'Come out of your huddle!"

"Write that down, dog!" Grant said to Manuel.

AFTER that I was too busy to know what was happening at the desk, or behind me, or anywhere but right outside my window, where all the spiks in the world seemed to be swarming around. My gun barrel turned hot in my hand. It seemed years before Grant was standing beside me. His shoulder pressed against mine as he squinted down his gun barrel, he made me feel better right away. There was something calm, invulnerable, about him that stilled my quaking nerves and steadied my hands.

A wave of men raced for the window. We could see they were going to make it. Not even a machine gun

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would have stopped that human tidal wave.

"Back into the hall, Manuel!" Grant called. "Come on, Flipper, let's go."

But the instant we opened that door, we knew we had reached the end of our little play. Grant stepped out of the door first and suddenly jerked backward as the hall reverberated to the pound of running feet. Before he could take a single step back into the room, he was down under a milling mass of arms and legs.

"Let him alone, you lousy spiks!" I screamed, and went into the mass after him. But it was no use. Two men can't lick forty. I fired my gun twice into the soft, yielding bodies. It was snapped out of my hands. Something clipped me on the chin and I went down.

"Grant," I yelled. "Where are you?"

After that, things got pretty dim in my mind. Looking back, I can remember vaguely that so many bodies piled on top of me that I couldn't move. I lay in that packed mass of sweaty, stinking bodies and clawed at them because that was all I could do with my hands. I remember cursing endlessly because Grant, the grandest guy I had ever known, was dead. You know how it is with two mugs who think a lot of each other. They bicker along, and get hard with one another, but there is something—oh, I don't know; it's hard to put a feeling like that into words.

I was dragged to my feet. Guys crowded all over each other hanging on to my arms. They were chattering like a lot of cats on a back fence and I could catch just enough of their Spanish *patois* to realize that they were arguing about how to kill me. Not *if*, but how it could be done most enjoyably! Even now, sometimes, I remember in my sleep some of the things they suggested, and I wake up in a cold, shivering sweat.

I looked around and my heart leaped. There was Grant, his red head towering over the natives who clotted around and on him like flies on a butter dish. There must have been six of them on each of his arms. He met my eyes across their heads and I give you my word he smiled!

I never knew quite how the argument ended, but we were dragged out of the building and into the noisy night. They pushed and hauled at us, dragging us toward Number One hangar. I glanced toward the black water of the harbor and there was the great Trinidad taxiing around and around, well off-shore and just out of rifle range. She looked unbelievably beautiful out there, with the moon shining down on her mammoth wing and with blue flame licking back and forth along her exhaust stacks. How long ago had it been when Grant and I had the Haiti, her sister ship, just as huge and just as gorgeous? My heart turned over inside me as I looked longingly at that slowly moving ship. But she might as well have been a million miles away, for all the good she could do us now.

CHAPTER V.

FIRING SQUAD.

THERE were a dozen or so Cubans pushing and pulling at us. The rest of the mob was at the other end of the concrete ramp, milling around one of the last buildings there. I didn't know what they were doing, and didn't care; I had plenty of worries at this moment.

The hangar was flood-lighted. One of the old eight-passenger Sikorskis

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was standing alone on the floor. I remember thinking how lonely and disheveled it seemed. I remember, too, that there was a lot of grease and oil and spilled gas on the floor. That was unusual in a Trans-Caribbean hangar; the whole terminal, I thought dully, must have been upset this afternoon by the riots downtown.

The Cubans walked us the whole length of the building and came to a stop when we were right up against the far wall. There were drums of oil there, and a couple of gasoline carts. One of the carts was leaking and a long thin trickle of gas was creeping across the floor. I wondered vaguely what Mr. Brent would have told Ben Lyman if he could have seen the hangar in such condition. Just at my elbow was the damaged wing of a Commodore, its ribs sticking out like an old skeleton. The place was in a mess.

I looked around and Grant was standing beside me. His face was white beneath his crimson hair, but somehow he was managing to smile at me. I smiled back, and my lips felt like old dried leather.

"We seem to be in a thin way, Flipper," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, you're a good guy to have come along, even if you were a damn fool!"

"Pipe down," I snapped, "I'm trying to think of a way out of this mess."

I wasn't, at all. I wasn't thinking, I mean. I was just feeling. And let it be said here and now that I was feeling like hell. I knew now how a guy must feel when six or eight huskies are leading him along the Last Mile and— Good Lord! I *had* been led along the Last Mile! It's strange, how a mug's mind refuses to accept the fact that he's going to die in a couple of minutes. He figures, of course, on dying some time, but it's always some time in the future, not right now, before you could possibly finish counting, say, one hundred. They say a feller thinks about all the things he's seen and done in his life during the last few seconds. But my own mind focused helplessly on the fact that there was four hundred dollars waiting for me at the paymaster's office that I'd never use, now. I was thinking of all the bottles of liquor I could have bought with those four centuries, and this and that—

The Cubans, licking their lips like dogs eying a platter of fresh meat, were gathering in a loose sort of semicircle, a dozen paces away from us. They were sharply silhouetted against the dark patch of the open hangar door, a couple of hundred feet behind them. They were mad with blood-lust, all of them. They had killed this night, and the veneer of civilization, which is never very thick on a native Cuban, had peeled completely off, leaving the savage exposed to view. I noticed one thing that I hadn't noticed before; most of them were of the lower classes. Their features were decidedly Negroid. They were out for a good killing and they loved the idea.

"Stand up straight, *Yanquis!*" snarled the leader, a wizened, bandy-legged Negro with a big holster strapped to each leg. "You talk about being brave. Let's see if you are."

He yanked his guns out of the holsters. The others all lifted their cannons, too.

"LISTEN, *caballeros,*" said Grant, calmly. "We do not mind dying. Death comes to all men, sooner or later, and the time of its coming matters not greatly." I translated

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his fluent Spanish with some difficulty. My mind was so upset that I wished he would talk English. "But it would be an act of courtesy if you would tell us why you are wishful to kill us."

"You are *Yanqui* pigs!" yelled four or five.

The bandy-legged bird stilled them with a wave of his weapon.

"You have flown most of our oppressors away from our vengeance," he said. "To-night we shall sack the Presidential Palace! And you will not be here to help Davrilla escape. There will not be one stick of your terminal left to receive him."

"You talk too much, Muñoz!" snarled a big man behind him. "Stop talking, and shoot."

Four or five of them raised their guns, and I took a great deep breath.

"Just one more instant, *caballeros!*" called Grant in a voice which boomed over the excited murmuring of the crowd, over the sounds of the yelling outside and the muffled thunder of the four taxiing engines on the Trinidad. "I have always heard those of Spanish descent speak of the lack of courtesy among the *Yanquis.* Yet in our country it is the custom to give doomed men the comfort of one last cigarette this side of hell. Would you give us that comfort? If not a full cigarette, at least half a one?"

There was a buzz of conversation. The Cubans argued pro and con, vehemently, as is their custom.

"Get ready," Grant whispered, "to run like hell!"

"You've gone nuts!" I told him. And I really thought he had. The only place to run would be right toward a dozen guys who were itching all over with eagerness to use their guns on us. I looked at him. He was staring thoughtfully at the floor, tracing patterns with the toe of his boot in a puddle of grease, or spilled gasoline, or something.

"You may smoke just one-half a cigarette!" announced the bandy-legged one, pompously.

Grant grinned, and bowed from the waist down in the Spanish fashion. He pulled out his packet of gaspers and offered one to me. The very sight of it almost made me ill. He grinned again, and pulled one out. He put it in his mouth. The Cubans had stopped talking, and were watching him with fascinated eyes. Grant, with great deliberation, reached into his pocket for a match. He brought out a penny box. Carefully he slid the thing open and lifted out a single match. His eyes swung to me before he scratched the match.

"The thing to do, Flipper," he said, with a casualness which was belied by the intent expression in his eyes, "is to pick 'em up and set 'em down without the slightest waste of time . . ."

Translating that, I knew I was to run. But where, and how? I didn't know. My pulses suddenly beat with renewed hope. I just left it to him and waited for the tip-off.

Watching him closely, I noticed that he did not close the match box. The matches were all inside, their tiny red heads protruding from the lid. He scratched the match. Even as it flared in a tiny spurt of crimson, it fumbled and the match dropped squarely upon those other matches in the box. And as if he had been burned, Grant exclaimed angrily and dropped the blazing box.

IT dropped exactly in the little rivulet of gas which had been leaking from the portable tank. The results were instant and catastrophic. The stream

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of gasoline puffed up angrily. The eager flame raced toward the tank and spread along the spilled grease and oil on the floor.

The Cubans, their eyes wide and staring, fell back. Those in the rear pushed against those in the front in their anxiety to see what had happened. And then, within four or five taut seconds, it seemed as if the entire place was ablaze.

"Run!" Grant screamed in apparent panic. "We'll all be burned to death!"

Even before I took my first step out of the flames that were licking avidly at my legs, pandemonium broke loose. Grant gave me a shove forward that almost threw me flat. I got into high gear and charged straight at the milling Cubans. It seemed as if I were running in a sea of belching fire, but the flames were just behind me. The Cubans, appalled by leaping tongues of flame, stampeded. Grant and I galloped through them like half-backs charging the line. There was a dull explosion behind us. Blazing drops of gasoline spattered in every direction. Sheets of bright yellow fire shot through the air. The whole hangar just behind us was a roaring inferno. And Grant and I were pounding along a slippery concrete floor which seemed to flare up in smoke and fire as our racing feet touched it. Long streamers and puff-balls of fire-shot smoke flew past us. Grant was beside me. I could hear panicky footfalls just behind me. A blazing torch that had been a man spurted past us, screaming horribly. He stumbled and fell. I hurdled the bundle of blazing rags.

My mind was awhirl. The whole world was exploding into a yellow and crimson hell. The screaming of men, the roaring of the blazing gasoline, the pounding of feet, all reverberated against the walls and lofty roof, making an unbelievable noise. The big open door was a million miles away. My breath was tearing through scorched lungs and the smoke was stabbing into my eyes like tiny, white-hot needles. I was running, running, and I wasn't getting anywhere. The door didn't seem to move toward me at all. I felt that it would be much simpler just to lie down, take one deep drag of air and flame and have the agony over with. But Grant was pounding along beside me and somebody had to stick with him.

And then, suddenly, we were out of that exploding inferno and were running in blessed cool air. I wavered. Grant's hand grabbed my sleeve and steered me straight toward the black pool that was in front of us. Blindly I staggered along, conscious that there was shooting somewhere and that angry bees were buzzing all around us. Something tripped my ankles. I stumbled, plunged face first and landed in the tepid water at the edge of the ramp. Instinctively I swam away from the hell behind us. My head came up and I looked wildly around for Grant. He popped out of the water like a wet, red-headed seal.

"Come on, Flipper," he said, calmly. "Swim fast. Keep under as much as you can."

I don't remember much about that swim. Perhaps we swam only twenty yards. It seemed as if we were swimming to Miami. The water beside my head was leaping up in queer little spurts that I vaguely realized were dangerous. There was a tremendous roaring behind me. The water was turning crimson with the reflected flames from the volcano that had been a hangar. There was another thundering somewhere ahead of us, but I was too

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confused to know what it was. And after what seemed a very long time, a huge silvery something was in my path and Ben Lyman's voice was saying,

"Here, give me your hand. Come on, lift the mitt!"

I SUPPOSE I must have slept most of the way back to Miami. My mind was drugged with fatigue and with violence. Have I said I was no fighting man?

Dimly I was aware that Ben Lyman was flying the big ship and that he and Grant were talking busily most of the way back to the air terminal as we plowed steadily ahead through the star-hung night.

One of the mechanics came back to where I was dozing in Seat 12 and told me that according to the radio operator, Federal troops had swooped in on the Havana Terminal just a few minutes after we had left. They had, it appeared, driven the mob off and saved the other buildings from the flames. A little while later Grant came in from the bird cage to tell me that the Federals had saved his little amphibian which had remained on the ramp during the whole schemozzle. We would, Grant said contentedly, go down after it in a couple of days.

Ben Lyman slipped in to the air terminal just after midnight. I looked at the buildings in disbelief, trying to recall all the things that had happened since Grant and I had made the same kind of a landing, in the same kind of a ship just eight crowded hours ago. The terminal was ablaze with light and there was quite a gang waiting for us at the float.

"Come on, Flipper," said Grant, with a thousand grinning devils in his eyes, "here's where we have some fun. Brent and Swasey and Ohstrom will all be there—and they don't know what we know! Manuel!"

I started and looked around. There, sitting inconspicuously near the lavatory, was the Cuban mechanic, looking as if he wished he could disappear like a wisp of smoke.

"He lammed for the plane when the going got good," Grant told me. "And now he's got to pay for his ride—by giving Brent a large and lusty ear-full of truth."

Ben Lyman taxied up to the float. The mechanics and helpers flocked around just as if we had made a routine flight. As Grant had said, Mr. Brent and Swasey and Swasey's yes-man, Ohstrom, were all there. But so, I noticed, were half a dozen Coast Guardsmen in charge of the three officers who had found the boxes in the wing of the Haiti. They all give us the eye when Grant and I clambered up the gangway.

"Greetings, greetings," said Grant contentedly as he faced the crowd. "Mr. Brent, if you'll bear with me a minute or two, I'll tell you some things that you'll be interested to know." Then, swinging to the Coast Guard officers, who had stepped forward, "Gentlemen, if you'll wait just two minutes, I'll surrender to you and will promise not to try to escape."

The officers paused, uncertainly. They looked toward Mr. Brent, who was staring at Grant with intent appraisal in his eyes. Swasey and Ohstrom had moved together and there was something curiously resembling fear in their faces as they watched Grant march straight up to them. He stopped directly in front of Swasey. He looked the man up and down with a lingering stare that brought bright spots of red into Swasey's face.

"In my pocket," Grant said, crisply,

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"is a signed confession from one of the men who handled your double crossing job this morning, Swasey. You're pretty much of a damned fool. If you hadn't wanted to break me, you could have gone on smuggling drugs for a long time, you and Ohstrom. But you knew I had no use for you and you knew I suspected something. You aren't gambling at the Casino every night with your salary—"

SWASEY, his face yellow under the bright glare of the floodlights, swung furiously to the Coast Guarders.

"Aren't you going to arrest this man?" he raged. "Here he stands, calling me—"

"And I'm not through, you lying, porch-climbing rat. I've got the goods on you now. I've got a witness right in the plane, waiting to tell the whole rotten business and—"

Swasey leaped for Grant's throat. Grant sidestepped and swung to Swasey's face. Ohstrom, cursing, dived for Grant. But as he plunged toward the big boy, I cut down on him with a rabbit punch to the back of the neck. I was tired and sick of the whole thing. I was tired of fighting, tired of all this uncertainty. God knows I didn't want much out of life; just to get back to my job of watching the engines for Grant and drawing my pay and getting peaceably drunk a couple of times a month. That wasn't too much for a mug to ask and the thought of these two rats upsetting everything caused my blood to boil over. I snapped Grant out of the way and put everything I had into a straight to Swasey's jaw which snapped his head back on his shoulders and took all the play out of him. He grunted and dropped beside Ohstrom, who had never lifted his chin from the concrete after falling under my rabbit punch.

"Anybody else want to draw cards?" I asked.

Grant laughed, for the first time since—since—well, maybe it had been around four or five o'clock, but I could hardly remember that far back in time.

"For a peaceable sort of bird, Flipper," he said, happily, "you're sure hell on skates in a schemozzle. You should have seen him at the Havana terminal, Mr. Brent. He wanted to eat raw red meat."

"I heard about him," said Mr. Brent, gravely. "Ben Lyman described the fight by radio while you were flying up."

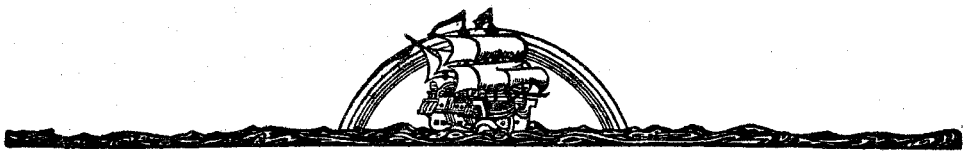
Grant turned to the Coast Guardsmen. "I'm ready to be arrested now," he said.

Mr. Brent spoke again. "I guess it won't be necessary. At least, before we've seen your proofs and heard from Manuel. Listen, Grant, it looks as if I were going to have to make a couple of apologies and maybe declare a cash bonus or two for extraordinary services to the line."

"I'm ready to listen, Mr. Brent," said Grant, quietly. "How about you, Flipper?"

"Me," I said, tiredly, "I've had too much helling around to-day. I'd rather go home and go to bed."

THE END



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There was death in the muzzle of that pistol

Class Ring

By CHARLES L. CLIFFORD

"I've waited a long time for this day!" said the half-mad soldier who threatened to settle an old score with Captain "Duty-Struck" Martin

THERE were only two men left alive now. One of these was an officer—though that fact was hardly evident, save for the dusty silver bars hanging drunkenly from the ripped collar of his sweat-soaked O.D. shirt. The man sprawled like a loose bundle of rags, inert from utter exhaustion. On the hard dirt beside him lay a pair of shabby field glasses, rubbed brown from use; and near the glasses was a worn service pistol, dust-covered by the red desert sand. Thrust forward through the low window of the adobe hut he held a service rifle, the oil of its last cleaning bubbling brown under the rear sight mechanism.

A heavy odor of dead sweat, and the sharper odor of smokeless powder, hung in the lifeless air. The steady drone of desert insects, together with the awful heat, came beating into the little room.

Captain Martin turned his head slightly. "Hennessy!" he said sharply.

There was no reply.

"Sergeant Hennessy!"

Captain Martin swung about, pivoting on his elbow, which was socketed

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in the dirt beneath him. His sunken, red-rimmed eyes took on their habitual gleam of authority, of military impatience. As he turned, he saw Sergeant Hennessy's body, twisted, with the knees drawn up and blood running slowly down over the half-opened eyes. As he raised his own eyes, the gleam in them gone now, he saw the other man—the only other man who was still alive in that shack of horror. He was staring back at him, and the captain had never seen this man before. Surely, he was not a soldier of this troop; yet there was a vague, familiar something.—Good God! Could these last two days have so changed a man that you couldn't tell who he was, staring directly into his eyes like this?

The man wore his warped, dust-covered campaign hat low over his eyes. His beard had come out in a patched stubble, partly gray; and the harsh, twisted hairs accentuated rather than filled the gaunt hollows of his face. Like the other men, his clothes were torn and grimed with the desert grit. The rolled up sleeves of his faded O.D. shirt showed no stripes.

The man grinned, revealing strong, white teeth. There was in the gleam from the faded blue eyes a hint of madness. Martin shuddered as he tried to wrench his gaze away from those crazy eyes, gleaming at him over the bodies of their comrades. Better a Mexican bullet in the face, cleanly, the way Hennessy had gone, than to live, if only for a few hours, in the company of a man gone mad.

Martin ran his swollen tongue over his dry lips. There had been no water for a day and a night.

"What's your name? You're not in my troop?"

The soldier shrugged a shoulder toward the bodies lying about the floor. "*Those* are your men," he said. He lifted his eyes away from the dead and stared out toward the mesquite-covered hills. There was a strange, distant look in his eyes. He said softly, "Your men—duty-struck Martin!"

The officer started as though a bullet had whipped close by. He leaned forward, staring at the other's averted face. The soldier swung his head and grinned mirthlessly back at him.

Martin tried to work saliva down into his parched throat. He swung about, sat up, laying his rifle across his knees.

"What in hell do you mean by that? Do you realize you're speaking to an officer!"

The soldier laughed hoarsely. "Your kind never changes! You'll be a first-classman all your life . . . " He looked out the window, still grinning. "Which will be until—say sunset, with luck!"

MARTIN pushed the rifle from him. Forgotten were the surrounding bandits, lurking in a lethal ring outside under the mesquite. His thin, brown hands clenched, and there was a sharp blast of red light from his left hand. Like a drop of bright blood was the stone in the worn, heavy gold ring on a finger of that hand.

The reflected gleam from the light-pulsing stone seemed to reach out toward that other, staring into the desert. As though a psychic message had touched him, the soldier turned; his eyes fell, and he watched that living glow.

Martin said, in a hard, cold voice, "Who are you! I am giving you a direct order to tell me your name and organization."

The man lifted his eyes from the sun-shot, red stone. "I've waited a

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long time for this day," he said. "For the day when the Great God Martin would know the bitterness of making a mistake. The only rift in the lute is that you won't have to pay—not properly. You won't live to have people point you out; to hear them whisper: 'That's Martin. That's the man who went so duty-mad that he sacrificed the lives of a patrol of a whole platoon—'"

"Damn you!" Martin raved, and he lifted the muzzle of his rifle and dropped his finger to the trigger. "This is insubordination in the face of the enemy—"

"And regulations give you the right to shoot a soldier in cold blood!" the man taunted. "Well, shoot, you—!"

There was a tense silence in the little shack; then, from back in the brush-topped hills came the sharp bang of a rifle, and a bullet thudded against the wall of the hut. Neither man paid it the slightest heed. They leaned toward each other, their eyes fixed, their dry lips tight-pressed with hate.

"Ah—I see," Martin said. His dead eyes lighted with relief; his taut face relaxed into an almost fatuous grin. "You're the messenger who came through, a while back. Your face—the expression on it—gave me a shock there when I looked around. You see, my own men—I knew every one of them as I knew my own hand. No help to be expected from the regiment, eh?"

He rubbed his hand up against his stiff hair, squeezing the sweat from his forehead. He knew that he was becoming a little mad himself. Why, then, shouldn't this soldier who had ridden through the night and the tightening Mexican lines to get through to his comrades with his useless message—why shouldn't he go mad, too? Not his fault, the chill curtness of that message—verbal one from the regimental commander in response to his plea for reinforcements. That curt message had said: "Can expect no support. Fall back on Rowson. Regiment moves on there at once."

"No help," the soldier agreed, grinning. "Do you think you deserve it?"

The man was indubitably mad. No old regular army soldier would even think of talking in such a manner to an officer. This awful ride he had made, and what he had seen since his arrival, had unbalanced him. Well, what difference? They were both here and soon would die together. And now Martin realized that never in all his service had he ever got close to the heart of any of his men. They, being enlisted men, had of course no chance to speak out from their inner emotions to him, a captain. And he, a captain, had never chosen to speak out to them—or to understand their emotions.

Now that death was a certainty and close, he became curious; curious as to what went on in a soldier's mind as regarded him, an officer. His outraged pride of a moment ago left him. He said curiously to the soldier:

"Why do you say that? What have I ever done to you? Forget for the time that I'm an officer."

THE soldier looked out through the bullet-scarred window toward the desert. Framed there was the low, red haze; the distant mountains. And above the mountains, against the brazen turquoise of the sky, a great buzzard wheeled and drifted. The man laughed shortly and looked back, staring intently into the wondering eyes of the officer.

"I'll start now and go backwards," he said. "It doesn't occur to you—yet—that you've done anything to *me*.

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But what about *them?*" He waved an arm to indicate the twisted bodies of the dead, thick about the floor of the shack. "You led those men to certain death—to satisfy your vanity. Any fool would have known that an unsupported platoon couldn't have existed an hour in this section of the river country. But you rode them through here to show that *you* could do it. It's entirely out of your troop sector."

Again the captain rubbed his hand up over his wet face. "Yes," he said. "That's initiative. Just to tell me that this Mexican bandit, El Bitter, could defy American troops on their own side of the line aroused all the initiative in me. Is it a crime for me to go out and do what I think is right, simply because routine orders and ideas don't suggest details? History is full of cases where officers have made possible great victories because they used brilliant initiative."

Again the soldier moved his hand so as to indicate the dead.

"Yes. And you never hear—in history—of those who made the spectacular coup possible; of the ones who died to gild the ego of such men as you. According to regulations, a platoon is a lieutenant's command. You should have sent their own lieutenant, given him definite orders, if you had to do such a fool thing. Instead, you probably left him half crazy with outraged pride, back in your camp. You took his command, led it yourself on this insane reconnaissance because, duty-struck as you are, you didn't quite dare take your whole troop and move it this far out of your sector. That would have been direct disobedience of orders, while this you would have called just a small scouting trip, to justify yourself. You've always been that way, duty-struck Martin. You've always wanted your cake and wanted to eat it, too."

Martin sat up straighter. A single shot came muffled from off in the mesquite; a bullet thudded against the window frame. But neither man paid it the slightest heed.

"You've used that name again," Martin said. "How did you hear that? Once, yes, they called me that—jealous idiots, school boys. But not since I've been in the Army. But I've heard that soldiers know things, and say things, about their officers that their own brother officers know nothing about. Do they—the soldiers—call me that?"

The soldier laughed harshly. "I wouldn't know about that," he said. He drew from his pocket a black Mexican cigarette and lighted it carefully. He blew smoke up toward the top of the hut, lifting his head far back. "So you thought to clear the river country of El Bitter with a measly platoon. To walk right into his home town, so to speak, and tell him off?"

Martin's eyes lighted with hate. "Yes," he said. "As a soldier, you wouldn't know. But when you speak about ego, what about him? A Mexican who brags he can lick any outfit twice the size of his own. A bandit who boasts that he can terrorize American towns, and run off the prize herds of the Big Bend. Who swears he has only to appear before Mexican Rurales—damned fine fighting men of his own country—and send them on the run without a shot being fired? You think I could sit idle and take his taunts?"

"So he taunted you, eh?"

"Continually. He sent me notes—insulting messages. What self-respecting officer would stand for that?"

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"You say he rode with no more than a platoon. Why didn't you take your troop after him? Three to one, then. You'd have had him."

MARTIN'S hating eyes flashed at the soldier as though he had said a foul thing. "A soldier can't understand a thing like that! You said yourself—you've read the border orders—you said yourself what standing orders are. Fixed in a prescribed sector, each troop of the regiment, and not to move out of there. An occasional patrol for reconnaissance and moral effect, yes. To satisfy the ranchers that we are on the job. But this part of the river—well, they left it uncovered. Just why I've never understood. Especially with this cutthroat running mad in here."

"As you say, soldiers hear things. Bathhouse rumors, maybe—but often truer than the straight dope which officers get. So my guess is that they left things open here to give this fellow free rein; to lure him farther into the country and get him up to Brite's. There's the prize ranch to plunder. And back there by the railroad have a mobile column, the Seventh, most likely. When he struck they'd be on him like a waterfall. Surround him with a regiment. But you—you had to spoil the game. You had to jump in here with your platoon and let him get you just where he wanted you . . ."

Martin groaned. "I couldn't take what was in his last letter. It came directed to me by name, in the mail, by way of El Paso—an outright challenge. He swore he'd meet me, with not more than a platoon; that he'd beat me in a fair fight. My God . . .!"

The soldier pointed out the window. "From the sounds, and from what your own men told me when I rode in, that's all he had. And he's licked you, all right!" As he said this, his eyes moved about the shack where great blue flies, now bloated and heavy with satiation, drone about the huddled dead. His eyes closed hard, as though involuntarily at the sight; his jaw tightened; he shuddered. "Your dead are scattered from hell to here. . . ."

Martin, too, shuddered. "Yes," he said thickly. "But this bandit knew the country; he knew that there was only that one trail. And I went by my map. It didn't show that arroyo back there—the dead end up here. Any other officer would have caught it the same way. They opened on us back there, and there was nothing left but a delaying action to pull ourselves out. We couldn't counter attack mounted—the ground was too rough and the sides of the arroyo too steep. What else could I do? Then they got us penned in here. There's no way out. What in hell else could I have done?"

There was harsh appeal in the man's voice.

The soldier said coldly, "Do? You need not have given in to your vanity. You need not have let a better man than yourself taunt you into losing these decent, gallant men, just to make a hero of yourself and to prove that you were a big shot, as compared with the other officers of your regiment."

Martin groaned. "I don't mind dying.—It's—it's just that they'll be saying—well, maybe what you said. They won't even know how I died, because when I got that messenger away, asking for reinforcements, I saw that we were trapped. I sent him off up the arroyo here before they got in behind us, and if he hadn't got back to the regiment you wouldn't be here now. Tough on you—but not much use for us. I can't see why they sent you."

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The other man laughed shortly. "Your sacred reputation, most likely! Never occurred to the colonel that an ambitious, cold-blooded, never-make-a-mistake-Martin would not pull out of a mere skirmish. And especially against this uncouth, unmilitary Mexican bandit like this El Bitter.—Your own man was hit, coming out."

Martin winced. "If it weren't . . ."

"Don't say it! Yes, I'm a private to you—and you're an officer. To hell with that! What difference does it make now? It's good for you to die realizing that. It's poetic justice, I think, for you to die with what you've always thought of as a mere dumb enlisted man—not good enough for you ever to have talked with like a human being before—talking cold turkey to you. Talking to you as though you were just the damned fool that now you must see that you've always been."

MARTIN said nothing. He shifted the rifle on his knees and looked out through the window. Then:

"They'll be coming in on us any minute, I should think. They must know . . ."

"They know that some one is still alive here. Why play them for the fools you'd be in their place? This El Bitter you sneer at should have convinced you by now that he has twice your military sense. If you can't see it, I can. If he sent his men in a rush now, in broad daylight, between the two of us, why couldn't we get at least five or six of his men? So why should he risk them? A man who has made his rep probably understands his men, and is decent to them.—No, he'll wait until it gets dark. Then they'll slip up and—" the soldier looked at the officer with a sudden curiosity. "You just said—they won't even know how you died. You said it as though some virtue or heroism might lie in the way you died. But how do you know there will be any? How do you know that you won't scream, plead, beg on your knees for your life, when that bandit and his men come into this place, with the dark?"

The snarl in the soldier's voice stirred Martin. "See here, you—!"

The man calmly lit another cigarette. "No use your pulling that. To hell with your two bars! You might as well take them off now—better, I'd say. St. Peter won't give you any better break when you flounce up there with them on. Chances are they'll prejudice him against you."

The soldier laughed hoarsely as at some drunken joke, and before the officer could realize the man's intended action, he had reached forward and torn the ornament from the officer's collar and thrown it far out into the dust of the desert.

He sat back then, sneering. "Your hat is gone—no gold and black cord to show your rank and grandeur. So now you sit there for all the world like these others. And when you go up to the pearly gates maybe God won't remember what a big shot you were down here. You may get through, as a buck private, but that'll be a lucky break for you, Duty-struck Martin!"

Martin, his eyes gleaming hate, stared speechlessly back at the soldier. His big brown hands clenched, and for a moment it seemed as though he would get to his knees and lash out at the mocking soldier.

Then once again a shaft of the late sun came into the dim room and struck fire from the stone in the ring on his finger. As though that light shot straight through him, the soldier shrank back, his eyes half closing. He said quietly:

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"Ah—I almost forgot." He pointed to the ring. "One last mark of the high-and-mighty. You'd better take that off, too . . ."

As the man spoke, he made a sudden forward movement and caught the officer's wrist in fingers of iron. Encumbered with the sling of his rifle, tight on his left arm, and with the awkwardness of the piece across his body, Martin was unable to stop the man. In spite of his struggles, the soldier tore at the heavy class ring and slid it easily from the shrunken, sweat-soaked finger.

Maddened, Martin cursed and swung the rifle, trying to fell the man. But the soldier only laughed hoarsely. He swung back out of the path of the rifle, and with an incredibly swift motion of his right hand drew the heavy service pistol from his holster. Insane with outraged pride and hate toward this madman, Martin retained enough sense to see that the pistol was cocked, and that another movement on his part might mean instant death.

With a supreme effort, Martin got control of himself, leaned back, relaxing. Instinct warned him to humor this man. Here was a soldier who was clearly obsessed with an inferiority complex. In the madness of this extremity, faced with certain death, this officer-hate which he had probably harbored for years in the ranks was manifesting itself in a distorted form. His frenzied aberration was reaching a climax that now outweighed, or at least mitigated, the thought of the fate that so clearly stared him in the face.

MARTIN tried to grin, as he sat there watching the soldier shaking the ring over and over in his left hand, his eyes straying to the bright lights of its stone, wavering from the man he was covering. Fascinated as a young monkey with a bit of glass, he seemed; and for an instant the idea came to Martin to take advantage of his wandering attention; spring upon him and disarm him.

But what was the use? He'd have him to watch then, as well as the Mexicans; and as the fellow had pointed out, when the attackers did rush in between them they'd be able to account for more than one. That would be a better way to die than to be shot in the back by one of your own men—or bashed over the head by one of the rifles lying about the floor.

"Put that pistol down," Martin said quietly. "You're an American soldier. When the time comes you want to die properly, don't you?"

The man raised haggard eyes from the ring. He looked steadily at the captain.

"Yes," he said. "I've always intended to. And there won't be a thing I'm ashamed of on my conscience, either. That's what's going to make it tough for you." He holstered the pistol as he spoke, and slowly slipped the class ring onto his own thin ring finger. He watched it, calmly turning his hand, half revolving the ring. "A pretty stone—a ruby. The sort of color a woman would rave over, eh?"

Martin started slightly. "Yes," he said.

The soldier smoothed the ring with a finger. "The crests are worn down so that you can hardly tell them, but the stone is still bright. In this light, if you look deep into it, you can see things. Not me, of course — but you could. You've worn this for years—ever since you were a kid — you could see all sorts of things in that stone. . . ."

He looked up and stared hard at the

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officer. "See here. Every ring has a story. Rings have more heartbreaks in them than anything else man makes to kid himself. They're symbolic, sentimental things, utterly without other use.—Take wedding rings. They're sacred; and yet you see them by the quart in pawn shops.—And engagement rings. I've heard of women taking them from men who loved them, putting paste stones in place of the diamond, and selling the real stone—even spending the money on other men."

"See here," Martin said. "For a soldier you seem—"

"Take class rings," the man said steadily, pushing aside Martin's words. "Military and Naval Academy rings. Four years of hell, those kids go through, dreaming of the day when they can put those rings on. And those four years are spent chiefly in building up a sense of duty and honor and loyalty. Not just to the school, not even just to the Service, but to the classmates who went through the grind and hell alongside of them.—Am I right?"

Some quality in the man's words, quiet and wistful, absorbed all Martin's attention now. Odd words and sentiments for a soldier. Possibly the man was one of those misfits in the ranks who had once dreamed of being an officer. Maybe he'd lost out somehow, and had sunk into the shell of the ranks—envying, hating at times—morbidly sentimental as now.

"You're right," Martin said quietly. He started suddenly. "Look here! You've water in that canteen. God, man, I'm—"

The soldier laid his hand down against the canteen hung to his belt. "Yes," he said, his eyes fixed on the officer's. "It's full." But he pushed the other man's reaching hand aside, and there was a grim smile on his bearded face. "I'll make you a proposition. This ring—I've always had a soldier's love for rings. You know how they mope about any kind of ring; how they spend their last cent on some brassy, fake-stoned thing and lose it at craps to some biscuit-shooter. They can't keep them, because they can't help playing the fool. Anyway, I never could.—But this one"—his eyes grew almost savage for an instant—"I can keep. This is going to be my ring—and the story that goes with it. I want to hear all about this ring, Duty-struck Martin." He glanced out toward the desert, where the light was dimming, and the blue coming into the distant mountains. "We've an hour, maybe—for you to tell me that story."

MARTIN made no reply. His eyes, riveted on the canteen by the other man's side, was distended and imploring.

The soldier lifted the canteen, unhooked it from his belt. He shook it, and the chain of the stopper clinked, the water gurgling inside. He held it out to Martin, gripping it tightly.

"All of it—but you tell me the story. The story of how you felt when you got that ring; of how you chose it; of how it felt when you first put it on, the last exam day, and your classmates tossed you into the bay off the sea wall."

Mad as he was for the water, Martin started, his eyes staring. "How did you know that?—That it was the Naval Academy I went to?"

"The crest on this ring, for one thing. Then, as you say, soldiers hear a lot of things about their officers. You left the Navy after your graduation, and came into the Army. You were

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never a popular man in your class; you felt you'd have a better chance with a new start among strangers in the Army than among the men who had spent four years with you at Annapolis—even though"—the soldier grinned mirthlessly—"you finished as a three-striper in command of a company, stood high man in Efficiency, and starred in your studies."

"See here! How did—?"

Again the soldier shook the canteen. "Never mind that! Let's say I heard the officers gossiping at stables, and that my hobby is rings. We're likely to have a boresome hour here before anything will happen. Let's have the low-down, Martin, on this ring."

Again Martin reached for the tantalizing, felt-covered water container. He pushed his tongue out and moved it across his tortured lips.

"All right," he said thickly. "But I must drink first.—Quick!"

The other man smiled again. "Word of honor as an officer that you tell the whole story. You've had fifteen years to think back on it; to decide whether it was worth it. I've heard enough gossip about it to be curious—curious about this ring, the girl, the other man."

Martin's head jerked. "You must be crazy!" he said. "What would officers in the Army know about the kid happenings of midshipmen?"

"They might have heard—gossip. Besides, Navy officers would remember.—And the acts of kids sometimes shape the characters and fates of men."

"Ah—I see! So you've done a hitch in the Navy? It was naval officers you heard—?"

"Maybe.—But it's getting late, Martin. You won't be needing this much longer. How about it?"

Martin pressed his cracked lips together. "No, no! You can go to hell! What business of yours are my private affairs? You seem to have heard nasty enough gossip; even more about me than there was to tell. My conscience is clear about it, anyway. Believe all the lies you've heard. What do I care what a crazy, insubordinate soldier thinks of anything I ever did?"

The soldier made no reply. He lighted another cigarette, drew a deep draft from the canteen, and looked off at the distant hills. Then he said quietly:

"No, you're the type that would never change; you'd never be wrong, even though there was a diagram to the contrary.—Here."

He tossed the canteen to Martin, and after it the crumpled, half-filled packet of black cigarettes. He smiled grimly and said, "In a way, I admire you. But I'm still bored; so I'll tell that story for you. Stop me if you've heard it!" He grinned mirthlessly, blew smoke toward the window, and settled back against the 'dobe wall.

Martin gulped down the water, gasping, drinking again and again. "Good God!" he said, and dropped the empty canteen at his feet.

The soldier tossed him a box of matches. Martin lit a cigarette and drew the harsh smoke deep into his lungs.

"Say anything you please—any lie!" he burst out. "You can't make me sore now." He smiled faintly. "I'm even a bit curious, now that I can think without burning up."

"DO you like the movies?—No? Well I think they're swell. Most soldiers do. Now just look at that wall over there—high, so you won't see what's on the floor. Imagine that's your screen. Now—the

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lights go out. You see a big square of silver light—a long shot—the buildings of the Naval Academy. You see the bay, bright under the late sun; the docks. There's the old Olympia, Dewey's flagship, anchored off the wall. Ah—there's the old Hartford, black and gallant—Farragut's flagship at Mobile. And moored above her you see the handsome, rakish Severn and the grim hulk of the Santee.—There's evening parade on, because it's June Week.

"Now you get a shot into one of the midshipmen's rooms. It's evening. Two men are there, roommates. One is all dolled up in his full dress; he's pulling on his white gloves. The other is boning, sitting under a reading lamp, boning; and in through the open windows comes the breeze from the bay, and with it the first music from the armory.

"The Second Class German is under way.—How's that?"

The officer, Martin, was indeed staring at the dull 'dobe wall, as though watching a fascinating picture. His eyes were wide and blank; he made no attempt to meet the soldier's eyes nor to answer his words.

The soldier laughed harshly. "Now—these two men are as unlike temperamentally as two men can be. The one at the desk is a bone and a greaser; and he's a man who wastes no time on women—a Red Mike you call them there—because time spent with a woman might hurt his marks and consequently his class standing. But he knows that they all feel for him; he is a vile egotist, and he keeps away from girls more to tantalize them and have them beg to meet him than for the other reason.

"The other lad is what they call down there a fusser. He goes for the girls, studies as little as he can get by with, and is always on the ragged edge of demerit allowance. But to-night's his night to howl. He's through the last annual exam; he's in love with a girl honestly and for all time. He feels a little sorry for his roommate, even though he doesn't like the guy, and has been forced to room with him because his own roommate was bilged and this is an odd man. Yes, he feels sorry for this drab fellow, boning, against all Academy ethics, out of hours, and especially the night of the class german.

"He urges him to come to the hop; offers him dances with his girl of girls. The guy only stares at him; reminds him that he has to make taps inspection at twelve; and that he intends to push on into first class work boning all summer."

"What was wrong with that?" Martin asked hoarsely. "Whose business except his?"

"None. But why didn't it work both ways? Get a load of this—now the other lad puts a thing up to him. He knows it's against regulations. But to-night's a night of nights, and his girl is waiting in the guest room down below, and she's been pleading with him. She's only a kid, full of fun and adventure. She wants to see a midshipman's room. No other girl ever has, and so she wants to; that's the kind of girl she is. And since she, too, thinks she's in love, she wants to see the room her middy has lived in. The greaser roommate says no; it's against regulations. And because he's duty-struck, according to his lights he'll have to report it if the other lad brings the girl up. A row between the two. 'To hell with you and your duty!' For once the gay young guy gets ugly. 'Report and be damned! My girl wants to come up,

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and I'm taking the risk. You can beat it.'"

"THE man at the desk was right," Martin said quietly. "Cowan knew that. He dragged her in there, and he might have ruined her reputation if she'd been seen. If he'd loved her . . ."

"If!" The soldier sneered. "A twenty-year-old kid—a June night—in love. And through with that hellish grind for the year! How would you expect sense from such a combination? You couldn't. So he brought her up, and the greaser waited there to report it, and—came to mock and stayed to pray. He took one look at the girl and forgot—"

"Listen!" Martin said harshly. "She urged me to dress and go to the hop! She—"

"You knew she was another man's girl; your own roommate's. And that he loved her. He'd just finished telling you that. But to be nasty, because he had cussed you out and called you a greaser, you turned your fatal beauty loose on this kid. Sure she urged you; politely—out of friendliness. She was so happy that she couldn't stand the idea of a man being shut up on a night like that and a hop going on. She didn't understand men like you; she thought of you as a hero, doing a hateful bit of duty. Studying, holding the sack, taking a midnight inspection when the rest were having a grand time . . ."

Martin wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He stared hard at the soldier. "You know a hell of a lot for an eavesdropper," he said. "If it weren't for your voice and your face, and the difference in your bulk and age, I'd say you were Cowan himself."

The soldier leered. "That would make it perfect—as a movie, eh?"

"You've talked a lot about that ring. Well, what about it?" Martin asked defiantly.

The soldier smiled. "Ah, yes!" He turned the ring over on his finger, and the expression of his gaunt face softened. "This was the very ring, of course. And I can see the whole thing as though I had been there myself. The green-shaded light, you staring up at this lovely girl, and she staring down at your abominable curly brown hair. Staring into those big, dumb eyes of yours that ought to have belonged to some Follies girl—and at that Grecian nose of yours.—Bah!"

Martin glared. "Go on!" he taunted. "Well, what about the ring?"

"It lay there—on the clean white blotting pad, the light reflecting from the red stone. The music came in very clear; the band was playing the Blue Danube Waltz. She saw the ring and she cried out, the way a baby does at some sudden object that makes it frantic to grab. It was Cowan's ring—too tight for him when it came, so that he'd left it there. He was going to send it back to be enlarged. Your own ring was an ugly plain one, a more practical one, of course. Well, she grabbed up Cowan's ring—just like a baby—and put it on her finger. 'I'm going to wear it—just for the hop!' she said. And Cowan, the fool, laughed and felt wonderful, and said he would wire the next day to Philadelphia for a miniature just like it."

"Was any of that my fault?" Martin asked harshly.

"You knew that your roommate loved her; yet you dressed and went to the german because she'd asked you to. Cowan never had a chance, once you got over there and went after that impressionable kid. You sneaked her out to the gun shed; you made violent love

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to her, while he was chasing frantically all over the grounds looking for the girl he had brought. He'd intended to ask her to marry him that night."

"I loved her, too," Martin said fiercely. "She was willing enough."

"Let that go. But think of how Cowan felt, when he finally found you; how he stood by a five-inch gun, out there, listening to the music from back in the armory, and to her, murmuring in your arms. Can you blame him for going out and getting drunk? Who would blame a man for that, except a duty-struck second classman, a brazzard? You'd taken his girl, or were on the way to it; and, to clinch the thing, you took his commission. You reported him absent at taps—late hop leave. As cold-bloodedly as you had gone after his woman. To her, you made him out a bum. You told her that he had chased out after booze, when he should have been there to take her home. You took that crying kid back to town and told her that.—But you never told him that. You just said you'd done your duty."

THE soldier was leaning forward, hate in his deep-set eyes.

Martin, too, was glaring back at him. "I was midshipman in charge of room and I'd been detailed for company inspection besides. I was forced to turn in an honest inspection report. If you understood that place you'd know how it was . . ."

"If you hadn't taken his girl, you know he wouldn't have done it. You were the cause of it; but he got the rap. He was kicked out even before the cruise.—And you sail away with the fleet, with him in arrest in that dead, empty room, with the girl gone to New Haven, the next day, and you seeing her all summer, I suppose.—And when he turned his ring in . . ."

"Stop!" Martin almost shouted. "It was the custom—class agreement. He was dismissed; he forfeited his ring; and the class president saw no reason why I shouldn't take that ring of his and turn my own in in its place."

The soldier laughed almost hysterically. "Of course not! His pal—his roommate—his 'wife,' as you called them down there—asking for his discarded ring. Why not? In memory of his bunkie. So the class president must have thought, anyway. But actually you wanted it because that girl fancied it. And I suppose you did what he was going to do? You got her a miniature just like it!"

A ragged volley of shots, clearer, closer, banged back from the hills. Martin moved about on his hips and lifted his rifle.

"It's almost dark," he said. "You'd better take a rifle."

"I'd like to know one thing," the soldier said. "I'm curious.—I'm like all soldiers; I'm curious. I hear you married that girl. I've wondered. . . ."

Martin had thumbed up the safety catch of his rifle. He was peering out into the increasing gloom.

"You're in the regiment. Back at Fort Bliss you may have seen her; you must have. Do you think she looked unhappy? Don't tell me!—Soldiers know every officer's wife by sight. So don't—"

The soldier moved closer to Martin; close enough to touch the man. "No," he said, "I wouldn't know about that. And besides—I don't think I'd know how a woman looked when she was happy. Once. . . ."

He was silent, and he stared past Martin, out toward the blurred mesquite.

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"We're going to die here together," Martin said. "You gave me that water—and that drag. It made me—well, it gave me more nerve than I would have had otherwise. I can do it better now. You hate me for some reason; because of that story you've heard, maybe. But you gave me that water, and you put that much more heart into me. So here—look!"

Martin took his hand from the rifle and reached into the pocket of his issue O.D. shirt. He handed a sweat-streaked picture over to the soldier. There was just enough light to see clearly the objects in the picture; a smiling faced, stout woman sitting on the steps of a set of quarters, and about her, in a straggling, sprawled group, five grinning children. Square in her ample lap was the baby of the family, the mother holding it, and supporting it from behind with her hands, so that its tottering legs would hold it up to the camera.

"That one—the little one, the only boy—he's James Cowan Martin," the officer said simply.

THE soldier started violently; drew his breath sharply, audibly.

"We agreed. Both wanted to name him after you, Jim," said Martin.

"So you know?"

"When you said that about the Blue Danube playing then.—Nobody but one of us in the room at the time would have known that. And I remembered it because it was then that I really looked at her. When she called out about the ring. Right at that moment I fell in love with her. I didn't give a damn about you or any one else; I knew I had to have her . . ."

The soldier said nothing. His eyes were fixed on the picture. There was a quiet, warm light in them now. He said softly:

"Well, she got fat. But you couldn't change that smile— Rose's smile. The kid's got it too, by God!—Little Jim, eh?—"

"I can see them coming through the mesquite!" Martin interrupted, his voice tense. "Better take the back window, Jim, and—" He smiled and touched the other man on the shoulder, felt for his hand.

The soldier took the hand, and for a moment they looked at each other and gripped hard. They stood silent that way for a long moment, then the soldier said quietly:

"You don't have to die, Jack. Do as I say.—Out the back window. Hold your hat—here, take mine—hold it tight over your head. Go up to the arroyo head, and call out as you move: '*Viva el arco iris!*'—'Viva the rainbow!' that means. They'll let you through without question then. There's a white horse by the tall pucca, about two hundred yards back. Jump him and ride like hell.—Quick now!"

"What's all this?" Martin asked, steadily.

"You guessed the other," the soldier said, "in spite of my unshaven face and the scars and my gassed voice.—Don't you see?"

"No," Martin said.

"I didn't want to tell you. Your messenger was hit, riding out. I took his clothes; the poor chap was through with them. I came in here with that fake message. I wanted to see you suffer. . . ."

"You're not a soldier?"

"A wanderer — soldier, yes, at times."

"I see," Martin said, his voice chill. "A renegade — with those spicks. Shooting down American soldiers."

"No," Cowan said quietly. "I'm with them, yes. I've been bitter, ever

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since the day when my dismissal order was read out at parade, in front of a lot of gawking plebes. Since then I've rustled rich men's cattle; I've fought for pay all over Mexico and South America. But never once have I fired a shot at an American, and I never will . . ."

"But you—?"

"They're coming now," Cowan said. "I'm safe here.—Go. In this light you can easily pass for me. If they come in on us here I can't save you."

Martin looked hard at Cowan. "I suppose I ought to hate you for this last business, but I don't. I even see how I've had a part in it, although I still think I did no wrong. I'll go."

Martin moved toward the rear window. Again he held out his hand. "Come back to us, Jim—to your own people."

Cowan was removing the ring from his finger. Without looking up he said, "Yes, now I can. I know now that I'm hungry for home. Here . . ."

Martin looked down at the ring. From outside there came the faint call of voices; muffled replies.

"No," Martin said. "It's yours, Jim. I want you to keep it. Rose would want you to keep it, too. When I get back—"

Cowan slipped the ring back on his finger. "Ah," he said. "For the first time in fifteen years I'm really happy! —Beat it, now!"

MARTIN touched the other man's hand, and then stepped swiftly through the window. Cowan watched his going, a deep smile in his eyes. It was dark, and in a few seconds the blur that was Martin merged with the desert growths. Tensely listening, Cowan at last heard Martin's voice calling out the words he had been told to repeat. And he heard the watching Mexicans reply.

He drew in a deep breath. "He's made it. He's through!" And as the ring of iron-shod hoofs rang out on the sharp malapai rock, Cowan laughed softly. "He's off—off to Rose and to —James Cowan Martin . . ."

There came the sound of harsh voices, closer; the flash of a rifle in front of the hut. Then more. Bullets tore into the place, ripping the mud plaster down in showers about Cowan's head.

"Hi! *Cuidado!*—It is I, Jaime!"

"He says it is Jaime!" a scared voice called. And then another, deep and cruel, replying, "You fool! But now, Jaime rode off on his white horse, calling the words as he warned us when he came out the back way. A trap of these tricky *gringos*.—Shoot into them! No quarter. For Jaime has ridden off and will never know anyway."

"My God!" Cowan yelled above the roar of fire. "It is I—it is—"

But the bullets found him then; and even as he sprawled back against the wall they tore at him as at a dusty carpet. He lay face up when the bandits stormed into the hut. One who held a flash light in his hand swung it about.

The big, savage leader exulted. "Not a one escaped . . . Turn the light here, Pepe. Where, then, is the captain? The smart one who would come out with a platoon to defeat our El Bitter?"

"No officer that I can see," wailed Pepe.

"Pigs!" the big man shrieked. "All of you turn over these carrion. Look for a man with fine leather boots on his feet—which later shall be mine—and with silver bars on his collar."

Frantically the bandits searched,

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under the lash of their leader's voice. But they found not what he had described.

"Ah!" Grinning the big man kicked at Cowan's body. "He lies here! No boots—and that makes me mad! And one cannot tell from his face—though I have seen this Martin at Eagle Pass—because the buckshot which you use, young Pepe, has blown that face completely away."

"Now, then, do you know that he is the captain?" Pepe, proud of the praise, made bold to ask.

"Ah!" the big man smiled, bent down and tore from the dead hand the class ring which had been made for that hand. "Always, among the *gringos,* the officer is told by the ring which he wears."

"If El Bitter—" one of the bandits started to mutter, his eyes blinking at the red stone.

The leader laughed. "You heard El Bitter give the word, and ride away. As you were about to say, if he were to see this fine ring he would fancy it. Or perhaps, with his odd ideas, he would punish us all for taking it from the hand of a *gringo.* So it is well that he has gone. And by the time he returns it will be safe upon the plump hand of my Lucia. Let us ride!"

They mounted and rode south. And as they rode the stars came thick into the low, desert sky. A thin moon threw a bright light that sparkled here and there on silver-studded equipment. But it touched nothing with more grandeur than the glowing red stone that Pancho Verbenas wore on the thick little finger of his left hand.

THE END

Waterways Under Paris

IN addition to a complex system of subways, with a plan similar to a star or spider so that in going from one point to another it is always necessary to change cars, Paris has several navigable waterways under its streets. Most interesting is the Canal St. Martin, where trim steel tugs and steel barges are lowered by means of two ancient stone locks and run for about three-quarters of a mile under a wide boulevard, emerging in a basin just off the Seine.

As the boats enter the locks there is much shouting and running about; the tall stack of the tug is folded backward by means of a steel cable till it lies parallel with the deck. There is generally a crowd of twenty or thirty to watch the "submersion." A man with a lantern stands at the tug's prow, signaling right or left as the steamer carefully nudges into the brick tunnel barely wide enough to take it without scraping. With a toot, tug and barges disappear, while the audience looks in and listens to the chugging.

The storm sewers of Paris remain much as they were in Victor Hugo's day—round tunnels with just enough water in the bottom, usually, to carry a rowboat. At one of the downtown sewers tourists are invited to ride for a modest charge. The rowboat, a large one, is poled along by four huskies, while two others hold aloft gasoline lanterns. More remote sewers are still used by criminals, it is said, as convenient and secret passages from one hide-out to another.

Delos White.

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WOMEN of DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
A WAR ANGEL!
Rachel Eleanor Crowdy, the first woman in history to win knighthood in her own right, is a 20th century — Florence Nightingale. She serves steadfastly—in war and peace—to help alleviate human suffering and misery.
DAME RACHEL CROWDY
DAUGHTER OF UNTITLED LONDON PEOPLE, SHE IS DESCENDED ON HER MOTHER'S SIDE FROM CANNING, THE STATESMAN. AT 18 SHE WAS ATTENDING HYDE PARK NEW COLLEGE WHEN SHE BECAME SERIOUSLY ILL. MUCH INTERESTED IN WATCHING HER NURSES WHILE INVALIDED FOR NEARLY 3 YEARS, SHE DECIDED TO BECOME ONE HERSELF.
ENTERING A NORWICH HOSPITAL, HER TRAINING WAS CUT SHORT WHEN SHE CONTRACTED BLOOD POISONING FROM A PATIENT. RECOVERING, BUT STILL FRAIL AND WEAK, SHE STUDIED CHEMISTRY AND BECAME AN OFFICER AND FIRST WOMAN DISPENSER IN THE BRITISH RED CROSS. AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE WORLD WAR SHE WENT TO FRANCE AS HEAD OF A VOLUNTEER AID DETACHMENT.
SHE SERVED UNFLINCHINGLY IN THE WAR ZONE AND WAS SOON MADE PRINCIPAL COMMANDANT OF THE V.A.D. IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM. SHE PERFORMED HER DUTY REGARDLESS OF DANGER AND ILL HEALTH. FIVE TIMES SHE WAS AFFLICTED WITH PNEUMONIA IN TWO YEARS.'

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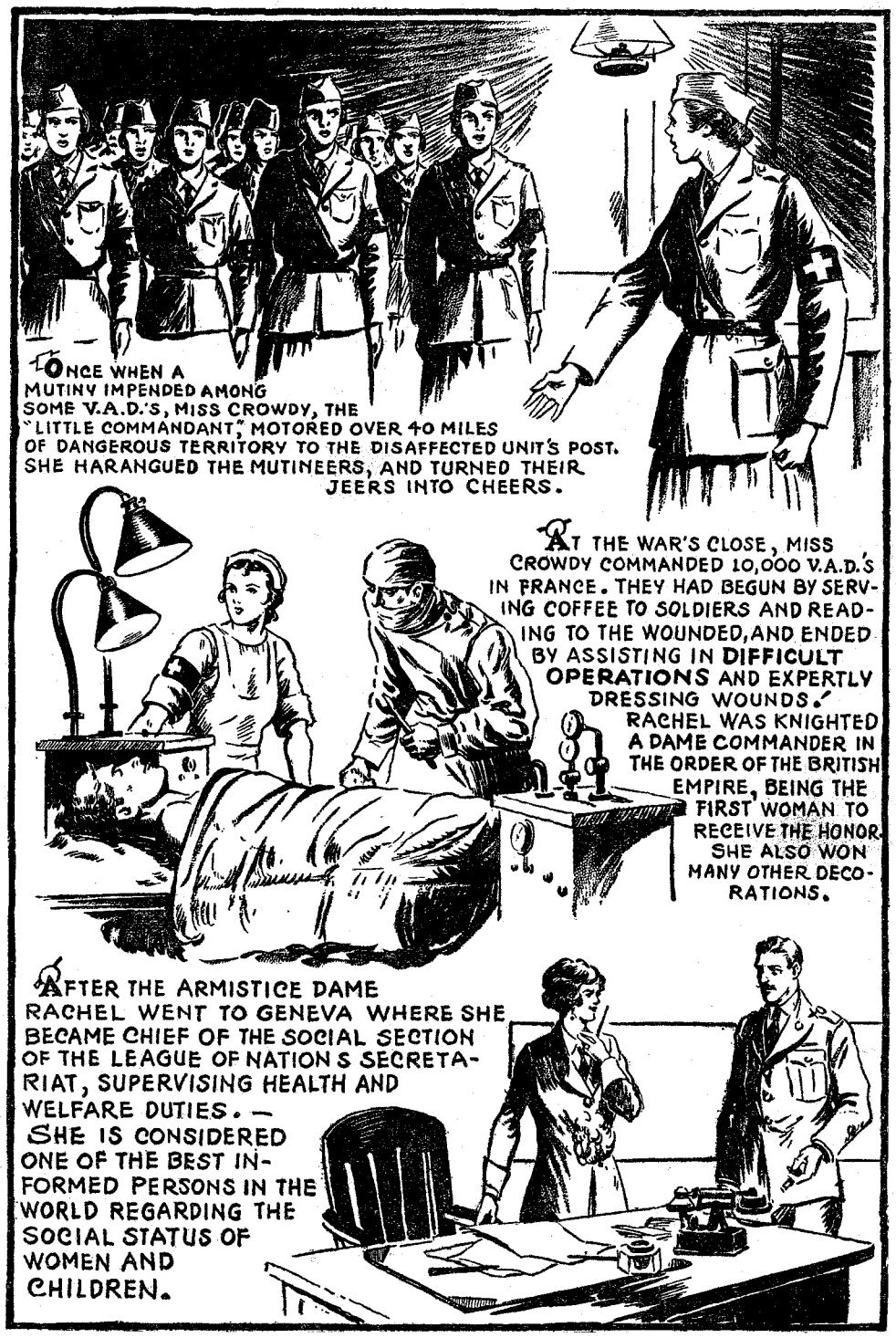
ONCE WHEN A MUTINY IMPENDED AMONG SOME V.A.D.'S, MISS CROWDY, THE "LITTLE COMMANDANT," MOTORED OVER 40 MILES OF DANGEROUS TERRITORY TO THE DISAFFECTED UNIT'S POST. SHE HARANGUED THE MUTINEERS, AND TURNED THEIR JEERS INTO CHEERS.
AT THE WAR'S CLOSE, MISS CROWDY COMMANDED 10,000 V.A.D.'S IN FRANCE. THEY HAD BEGUN BY SERVING COFFEE TO SOLDIERS AND READING TO THE WOUNDED, AND ENDED BY ASSISTING IN DIFFICULT OPERATIONS AND EXPERTLY DRESSING WOUNDS. RACHEL WAS KNIGHTED A DAME COMMANDER IN THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE, BEING THE FIRST WOMAN TO RECEIVE THE HONOR. SHE ALSO WON MANY OTHER DECORATIONS.
AFTER THE ARMISTICE DAME RACHEL WENT TO GENEVA WHERE SHE BECAME CHIEF OF THE SOCIAL SECTION OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS SECRETARIAT, SUPERVISING HEALTH AND WELFARE DUTIES. — SHE IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE BEST INFORMED PERSONS IN THE WORLD REGARDING THE SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

Next Week: John McElligott, Smoke-eater

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The glowing point came closer to the Russian's flesh

Shaman's Trail

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Forbidden Mountain," "Two Days to Live," etc.

That Northern post was Corporal Shane's first command—which made him the more determined to stop the sinister things that were going on there

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

WHEN Corporal Jerry Shane of the R. C. M. P. received his first command at the Mackenzie River Post, he was determined to make a good showing. With his special constable and interpreter, the faithful old Eskimo, Quitlik, he moved into the new district, to discover that serious trouble seemed to threaten his rule from at least two different quarters. One of these sources of trouble was an Aleut shaman called Shappa, who had risen to power and was now stirring up the native tribes with his magic and his witch-doctoring.

The other source of trouble was somewhat more immediate, and it concerned a Russian refugee whose real name was Alexis Kolitsin, but who was known thereabouts as Basil Dorn. Apparently, the Russian Soviet government wished to get hold of certain valuable family jewels which Kolitsin was supposed to have smuggled out of Russia; and accordingly, Gregory Krim, a Soviet agent was sent to trail the refugee. Kolitsin (alias Dorn) was trying desperately to recover from an old wound, and he was being harbored and nursed by an independent Scotch trader,

This story began in the Argosy for August 18

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Alec Ferguson, with the assistance of his niece, Nellie Chadwick, and a loyal half-witted native cripple named Inoocheak.

Shane arrived at Ferguson's store just in time to upset the intentions of a troublesome half-breed who called himself The Hawk, who was bent upon annoying Nellie Chadwick. And later it turned out that The Hawk, together with Khatu, a full-blooded Dogrib Indian, was in the employ of the Soviet agent, Krim, in an attempt to force Kolitsin to give up the secret of the hidden jewels.

Krim flew into the district in a mystery plane piloted by one Folger, who maintained that he was in the employ of the Boreas Power Company; and Corporal Shane, attempting to investigate the licenses of both pilot and plane, got himself into trouble. Sensing that the Mounty would make trouble for them, Krim and Folger attacked him, and Krim ordered Folger to take Shane's senseless body up in the plane and drop it. But although he was severely wounded the corporal came to in time to force the pilot to land. Shane escaped with his life, though Folger managed to get away in his plane.

CHAPTER IV.

SHAPPA THE SHAMAN.

JERRY SHANE had two doctors. They were both amateurs in the cure of physical ills, though experts in their own profession, the care of souls. Missionary priests, of both the Anglican and the Roman Catholic persuasions, they worked side by side, here in the wilderness. To fit themselves better for their task, each had studied something of medicine and surgery; and so between them, sharing attendance, united in consultation, they worked over the corporal.

There was no fracture, they decided. A concussion that might result in a clot, but did not—in large measure, perhaps, because of Shane's clean blood, his splendid heart, and his will to get back into harness. Inside of three days he was on his feet again, though for three more he spent much of his time in a chair, running the Post.

The snow was continuing. It seemed as if Winter, in a desperate rally to retain his realm, had beaten back Spring and discouraged her.

It was doubtful if Folger's plane had escaped. There was no sign of it, but they were weatherbound. The trails were deep, the Post was beleagured.

As for Krim and the Hawk, Shane was willing to believe that they had been gripped by the storm, and he would not have been sorry if they had succumbed. They had done their best to kill him.

Yet he had a feeling that the devil might have taken care of his own. The Hawk, at least, was able to look out for himself, and he might have looked out for Krim, regarding him as some sort of gold mine.

Shane figured that they must have planned to have Folger to pick them up. Certainly Krim would have done that. And the Hawk would count himself in. All three had been partners in the attempted crime. They were now outlaws, screened from justice for the time by the storm—if they were still alive.

Shane had a nasty scalp wound that he debited to Folger. Also his wrist, tightly taped, with a leather wristlet over the tape. But his wrist was healing. He had been struck with a blunt instrument, very likely a blackjack. That would have been Krim. The Hawk did not use such weapons, and he might even have refrained from the actual attack, although that did not lessen his guilt.

There was plenty to attend to, to prepare for. Quitlik had been called to the Hudson Bay Post by Mitchell. The other constable had joined them, hold-

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ing them from any thought that Shane was in peril, until they had missed him on their return to the barracks, had at last heard the plane returning, had seen it and gone to meet it.

Quitlik's shot had undoubtedly saved Shane from a final, and probably fatal, blow. The corporal did not forget it. There was now a true bond between the pair. Quitlik sensed much of what had happened, though Shane did not discuss it. Shane, badly wounded, had won back to duty. Mutual respect linked them. That is the way of the north—of all frontiers. Few men are listened to; most are judged by their deeds.

There had been trouble at the Hudson Bay Post. Indians demanding supplies, still in debt, surly and finally cowed only by the stern front of the constables.

The mysterious shaman seemed to be at the back of it all. There were covert threats of violence, of determination to help themselves to take over the land. The Indians who lived about the Post, attaching themselves to it in the surety of being provided for, less hardy, or more greedy than the outer tribesmen, knew more than they would tell. It was clear that they were ready to go over to the insurgents, the moment they felt that the white man's law had weakened.

SHANE interviewed them, Quitlik at his side. He coaxed or bullied them, speaking of the might of the Empire, of their own foolishness in listening to a shaman; of the dire revenge that would overtake them if they rebelled.

But there was something that seemed to sustain them. It appeared that Shappa the Shaman was a sort of savage messiah, preaching and promising things that were absurd, but which appealed to the savage sense and instinct.

He appeared from nowhere, setting up his ghost-lodge in the night, performing miracles, recalling the dead, speaking through the lips of the dead.

"He is like a flea on a musk-ox; hard to place," said Quitlik.

The Hudson Bay Post manager, and the free traders who had also been molested, like Ferguson, would send in their complaints as soon as trails were open. They would call for aid, implying that Shane was inadequate, and in time these complaints would reach Ottawa. Orders would come down the line. Insurrections had been quelled before, and must be again, by the means at hand.

Every Mounty was a general, in times like these. The responsibility was up to Shane. Success would mean promotion—or at least open the way for it. Failure— Shane refused to consider that. But he knew that when he thought of promotion he thought also of Nellie Chadwick. He could not tell how she was faring, and the romantic Kolitsin as well. A woman who nurses such a man, Shane told himself, must engender much of the pity that is akin to love. Kolitsin had glamor. In health, he would be all man, with the added lure of his nobility, and the courtliness that went with it. He had been a brave soldier, and no doubt he was an efficient lover as well.

On him also would descend the sympathy, the gratitude that goes from patient to nurse. And the girl was rare. Not even in Kolitsin's now vanished court could he have met a sweeter, truer one.

Those matters were on the knees of the gods while the snow came down. Shane was finding it difficult to stand without feeling dizzy; but felt strength

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come back to his legs and the stiffness go out of his neck. He tried to dismiss them, and succeeded, concentrating on what he must do to offset the Indian situation.

Shappa must be squelched, of course. That was outstanding. He laid plans, though they had to be tentative. He realized that there would be exaggeration; nevertheless the talk he had, through Quitlik, with an Indian known as One-Foot-in-Hell, gave him plenty to think about.

One-Foot-in-Hell, with his wife, was employed at the Hudson Bay Post. Three years before, he had been lost in a storm, and had nearly starved to death before he was rescued. One foot had been badly frozen, and because it was numb and of no use to him, he cut it off and used it for food. The Hudson Bay Company had provided him with an artificial foot and he was grateful for that, as well as for the keeping of his job. The factor of the Hudson Bay Post brought him to the barracks. Both the factor and Shane could understand him fairly well, in his jargon, but Shane told Quitlik to have him talk in his own dialect. Thus, through translation, he got a fuller, freer tale.

"THIS I have not seen with my own eyes," said One-Foot-in-Hell, "but it was seen by the nephew of my wife, who talks with a straight tongue. Others have also spoken, and their stories are the same.

"In the night, the shaman comes. None hear him. There is no trail in the snow.—In the morning, the ghost lodge stands there. It is black; inside and out it is black. Also, Shappa is dressed all in black, and his face is blackened.

"In the midst of the lodge there is a table without a cover. And there are strange lights, of different colors, like the colors of the dancing lights in the sky at night. They change, and they quiver like leaves in the wind. There is the sound of drums and flutes, though the lodge is empty and there is no music box."

By "music box" Shane understood, of course, that he meant radio.

"Shappa is alone. He passes round a skull-box. There is no skull within, but there is the head of a dead man. It is dried, the eyes are sunken, and the lips are sealed. This, says Shappa, is the head of Nitlook, who lived a thousand moons ago. It was Nitlook who led the seven tribes against the white man. He was not defeated, but the braves lost many men, and they left him, so that he went alone into the muskeg and was seen no more.—There are many who say that this is indeed the head of Nitlook. These are the old people who have been told how Nitlook looked by their parents.

"The head of Nitlook is placed upon the top of the table. The drums beat and the lights change. The head comes to life and speaks. There is no doubt of this magic. The eyes opens and the lips move, the voice of Nitlook comes from between them.

"This time, says Nitlook, the tribes shall triumph and the land that was taken from the red men shall be restored. The white man shall be driven back. The caribou and the moose will return. The waters will be filled with fish and there shall be no more stickness, such as the white man has brought into the land.—Then bids them wait for the word."

SHANE gave One-Foot-in-Hell a quarter of a pound of tobacco, asked him how much of it he believed.

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"These things have been seen," said the Indian. "There is shaman magic and white magic. I think that white magic is the stronger. But others may not think so. Perhaps they only see what the shaman makes them see; I cannot tell. But my tale is a straight tale."

"Some sort of hypnotism, I suppose," suggested the factor. "It don't matter a damn how it's done, if it works them up enough. I'm afraid to send in my reports, Shane. We're deep in the red, at this post. They expect me to collect for past debt, and the Indians are howling for more."

Shane did not agree with him. Whatever illusion Shappa produced must be dispelled in some way. It must be shown that the white magic was superior; that it saw through the shaman's methods and could expose them. However, that was far easier to think about than to solve. One-Foot-in-Hell's declaration that he thought white magic was stronger was sheer time-serving.

A dead and undefeated chieftain come to life, talking in an empty lodge, was a serious matter. Shamans were always spiritualists, mediums, raisers of the dead. The missionaries strove to break up such beliefs, and the Mounties to suppress them. It was fantastic, but the wilder the tale, the more the slightest evidence, or exhibition, would establish it. Only when the last Indian was dead would his credence in the spirit world dominating this one disappear.

"The answer is," said Shane to the factor, "that we must expose Shappa and get rid of him—prove him an ordinary mortal and make an example of him."

"I quite agree with you," replied the factor, grinning. "I wish you luck, Shane!—It's your job, not mine."

When they had gone, Shane turned to Quitlik. "What do you think of this?" he asked.

Quitlik took out his well-charred pipe, and Shane tossed him his pouch. Quitlik filled and puffed.

"This *I* have seen," he said. "You have seen corn grow in the mission garden? The father boasts of it. It is hard to grow so far north. Now, when I was young, I saw this in a snow-house. There was a shaman there—a very old man, whose skin was wrinkled like the hide of a walrus. All did him great honor, for he had come from afar, and he was esteemed as a very wise man.

"In that snow-house, in the hard floor, he planted a seed of corn, and placed a cloth above it. Then the cloth lifted of itself, and he took it off, and showed us the green shoot of leaves. So he did this again, and the last time there was an ear of ripe corn. I myself held it and felt it. He offered it to the chief man to cook and eat. As is the custom, there were no women there. But the chief man would not eat because it was magic corn, and he was afraid.

"So the shaman left it, and it stayed in that snow-house until it withered and dried. But none would touch it. That was a very great shaman. That I have seen—and touched. But I do not know."

"It was clever juggling," said Shane. "Among white men there are some we call conjurers and magicians who do such things on the stage, but they do not pretend that it is real magic."

"That may be," said Quitlik. "Such things may be play for white magicians. Yet I do not see how a dead head may come to life, when those who behold it sit in a small lodge and handle the head.

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It speaks in their own tongue, and it tells of things that have been passed down. I do not know."

"I'm not much ahead of you," said Shane, "but I do know that Shappa must be shown up as a fake."

"This is a hard country to travel," replied Quitlik, voicing an Eskimo proverb that meant more than the actual words implied.

Shane was silent, thinking, drawing on his pipe. A hard country to travel, indeed. It kept its secrets. And the trail of Shappa, the Shaman, would be hard to follow.

STILL the snow fell, and the wind moaned through it in gusts. Drifts mounted, blotting out everything, piled up to the tree-tops, and covered them. It could not last long, but the final flurry of winter was like the last flurry of a harpooned whale, which is most dangerous in death.

Save for the clock, one could not tell just when night came. All day there was a dark dusk that gradually deepened. The thermometer sank slowly but steadily. Beasts sought their dens, caribou huddled in what lee they might find, and trout sought the bottom in lake and river.

Shane was in his bunk, unable to sleep because he was pondering over too many problems, when he heard a faint beating on the outside door. It was warm within; the big stove glowed like a ripe cherry. But he knew that outside the temperature was still falling. A glance at the windows showed them crusted with snow that would have been ice, save that it was powdered into minute crystals.

He flung a fur coat about him and opened the door. It came with a rush, the gale behind it in a sudden blast. Something fell across the threshold, a shapeless form shrouded with white, sprawling, almost inanimate.

With effort, Shane shouldered the door shut, while snow whirled into the barrackroom, melting on the floor. He dragged the man to the stove, broke through the frozen mask of ice on the parka hood, and saw the blue features of Inoocheak, the dwarfed hunchback from Ferguson's! He was exhausted, stiff, yet not quite frozen. His furs had saved him. But another mile—half a mile—would have seen him down, to die. His heart beat feebly, but he managed to swallow some brandy.

Shane shouted, and his men came hurrying, Quitlik first. They stripped the hunchback, chafed his limbs, rolled him in blankets. Carefully, Shane fed him more brandy. He did not think Inoocheak could stand too much, although his body would demand more than his brain. He did not want to muddle the dwarf. It could be no common errand that had brought him through the bitter gale; no ordinary motive that had sustained him.

They got him into a bunk at last, and saw the light of what reason he possessed come back to his eyes. He struggled furiously, and Quitlik strove to quiet him, speaking his own tongue. Inoocheak gabbled back.

"Ferguson is too sick to leave his bed," he interpreted to Shane. "The girl is missing. Inoocheak says two nights ago, but he does not know how long he has been upon the trail. He came down the river, between the cliffs. The wind has kept it fairly clear.—But he must have been more than a day upon the way."

SHANE was warming soup from a tin. He broke several crackers into it, and they spooned it into the dwarf's mouth. He gulped at first

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with difficulty, then the strength of the food began to go through him. He sat up, clutching at his blankets, and spoke more coherently, still stuttering but in deadly earnest. His dull eyes glowed.

"The man with the beard," translated Quitlik, "would not stay at Ferguson's. He went back to his own cabin as soon as he could walk. But he was weak. The girl cooked food and took it to him, and looked after his wound. Sometimes Inoocheak went with her, but because Ferguson was ill and in pain, and the store could not be left, she often went alone.

"One night—it may be two or three ago—she did not come back. Ferguson could not move from his bed. He was like a madman until Inoocheak said he would come here for you.—I do not think I would have tried it," Quitlik added simply. "It is a great magic that has brought him through."

Shane nodded, "If he got through, we can," he said. "We'll leave him here. Will you come with me, Quitlik?"

Quitlik's look was like the reproachful look of a faithful hound. However, "I will get the dogs," he said.

Automatically Shane gathered supplies, collected arms and ammunition. He looked at the thermometer outside the door; it read twenty-seven below. But he thought the fury of the storm was breaking.

He gathered furs, took brandy and tinned goods, his mind fighting off desperate thoughts—of Kolitsin, of the girl snared by the storm, of One-Foot-in-Hell, even of the Hawk. Those thoughts beat about his brain like bats.

Quitlik came through the swirling snow with the sled, the dogs harnessed to it. They had been roused out of the snow where they had slept, buried, tails over muzzles; but they were eager. Vapor rose from them by the light that shone now through the snow-screened windows.

It was three in the morning. There would probably be no true dawn. The sled was loaded. They knew the way; however, most of the direct route would be closed, impenetrable because of the drifts.

Quitlik sniffed at the chill air. "There may be one more blow," he said, "but afterwards we shall have a quiet spell. I think it will be best to go as Inoocheak came, by the river."

"Let's go," said Shane. "Mush, you huskies!"

The dogs whined. They seemed to sense the need and spirit of the occasion. Inoocheak's trail was lost, but they crushed through, down to the frozen river. It lay like a steel corridor between its cliffs, broomed by the wind.

CHAPTER V.

THE HAWK HOVERS.

ON this trip, Shane did not wear his scarlet coat. He was clad in deerskins, and his parka was of fur. Quitlik, too, was armored against the bitter night. It was not all smooth going along the river; there were ice jams, bolstered by rocks, over which they had to help the dogs and shove the sled. For all the temperature, the men soon were sweating, the dogs' hides smoking.

The river curved to within a mile of Ferguson's place, and they set their strength against the elements. Shane was sustained by his duty, and by something else that roused all his spirit—the plight of Nellie Chadwick. This might or might not turn out to be a strictly police affair, but it was a part

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of his job. Moreover, he knew that he burned with a deeper impulse, and he reined in his vagrant thoughts of what might have happened, knowing that he would soon find out.

But he could not help marveling at Quitlik, breasting the fury of the night, risking his life—for what? It was not all love of the Service, or devotion to the white man's cause. Quitlik was a true adventurer; risks challenged him; he was a *man*.

They forged on through the cold, dark night, each aware of the other's valor, white man and brown, bent ir a mutual enterprise. Shane had the more to gain, and he marveled at the lesson the Eskimo taught him. He gave him, perhaps, too much credit, for Quitlik had been born, bred and inured to the climate. But they matched each other in their endeavor; they were comrades, tried and true.

Twice they halted to feed the panting dogs, and swallowed tinned pemmican and a gulp or two of brandy. The hard time arrived when they came up out of the river. The wind had died, but the drifts were deep, and in spite of Quitlik's good judgment they could not seem to avoid them. They wallowed through them; and at times, when the huskies sank in snow, they lifted the sled to their shoulders.

So at last they came to where a spark showed against white-mounded trees. Ferguson they found flat on his back, in a pitiful condition. It had cost him agony to tend his fire, to find food, during Inoocheak's absence. But there was fire enough in his spirit.

"Thank God ye're here!—That the lad got through!" he gasped. "I'll see he wants for naught, from now on. But awa wi' ye! I can fend for mysel'. An' if that Dorn, wi' his smooth speech an' ways, has done hurt to Nellie, I'll rise, tho' 'tis fra' my grave, an' strangle the life fra' him.—Yet I am fearsome o' other things. The wolves ha' been howlin', nicht after nicht. My lassie—my bonnie lassie!"

"We're going to Dorn's cabin," said Shane.

He and Quitlik had heard the wolves, had even seen a pack racing on the river's bank. The thought of what might have happened, of some horrible tragedy of the lone girl and the ravenous pack, was insupportable. The wolves were thick, they had not been hunted, and they were bold. The long winter had made them fierce.

"We'll find her," he said, with more confidence than he felt, and noting Quitlik's eyes. "She'll be all right, sir. And don't think too badly of Dorn," he added, generously smothering the wild notions in his own mind, of Dorn and the girl together, storm-bound—and it might be willingly. "The man's a gentleman," Shane went on, "I've learned something about him."

"I mistrust it's nane too guid," muttered Ferguson. "If he's deliberately tempted her to come to his cabin, an' if he's ta'en advantage o' her, I'll ha' the living heart oot o' him. Gentlemen are no always too gentle wi' women. An' the lass seems fey aboot him!"

WITH that last sting, Shane got the direction of the cabin of Basil Dorn, who was also Kolitsin the noble. The words of Krim came back, and rankled, "The Kolitsins have ever been irresistible to women."

If Nellie had chosen him, that settled it, so far as any romance that Shane felt establishing itself in his own heart was concerned. He told himself that would be the best thing for him, but

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his self communication was not very convincing.

They plunged on through the night, the dogs protesting, having decided they had come to their last stop. Quitlik looked to their feet carefully, clearing them of ice that formed between the claws. He put pieces of adhesive tape on abraded spots, and moccasins on all of them, lacing them carefully on.

Above the sixtieth degree of latitude, winds are born and die suddenly. The gale had stopped blowing, and with the halt, as if it had brought the snow along, the flakes ceased to fall. For the first time in days, clear sky appeared, set with stars that shone like white diamonds and then were suddenly eclipsed in the glory of the Aurora. It came like the golden chariot of Jove, crackling and shooting out lightnings. It gathered in quivering clusters, like a celestial chandelier, long rods of fire, spectrum-hued. And with it there sounded the strange music, eerie and faintly sweet, like the jingling of a million sistra before the goddess Isis. The air throbbed with it; was charged with static energy.

The fantastic display made other things unreal. It seemed to Shane a harbinger of hope. That curious tingling that reached from toe to fingertip, and that always glowed through him when the Aurora danced, made itself manifest.

The abandoned cabin that Kolitsin, as Dorn, had pre-empted, had been cleverly sited. It was in a slight hollow, protected on two sides by timber windbreak, and on another by the shoulder of a knoll. From all storm quarters, the wind kept most of the ground about it clear. But there was a high drift in front that totally obscured it, so delaying their locating it.

The door was closed, but not fastened. Inside the cabin, of one large room, with a small lean-to attached, it was bitterly cold.

The fire in the stove had long ago burned down to smoldering embers.

Shane's keen eyes swept the place in brief but thorough inspection, aided by his electric torch. The evidence was plain. There had been a scuffle. Half-finished dishes on the table had been knocked to the floor, or pulled there as some one grabbed the cloth. A stool was overturned. One wool mitten lay near the door. By its size it was the girl's, and Shane cursed the man who had dragged her into the freezing night with a bare hand.

He figured there had been gunplay, or display; that Kolitsin and the girl had been covered by a third person, and threatened. Kolitsin would be none too vigorous, though his wound should be healing, if all had gone well. It was the girl, he fancied, who had clutched at the tablecloth, in a final, useless protest.

Shane thrust the mitten into the breast of his zipper-fastened parka and went outside.

Quitlik had been busy, meanwhile. The tired and discouraged dogs were lying in their harness. The colors of the flaming Aurora were palely reflected in places on the snow, making it faintly opalescent.

"THERE were four," said Quitlik. "Two were carried out. I think the man was stunned; you can see where his feet dragged in the snow. Their snowshoes should be inside."

"I saw them there," said Shane.

"The two who came had a *komitik*, with five dogs. They left them in the timber, and came that way, to the cabin.

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One was Indian, on bearpaw raquettes. The other wore boots with hobnails. It was not snowing much then, but it snowed heavily afterward. The wind has blown off the last snow fall. Their tracks were made on harder snow, and so they stayed. I can see where they entered the trees and went out again, but out on the muskeg the trail is blurred. Yet I can tell where they straightened out, and I think I may know where they are going."

Shane looked at the "sign," rayed it with his torch. He was not so much checking up, as adding to his own knowledge of how to read a dull, cold trail.

He remembered Krim's boots. He had noticed the pattern made by the hobnails. Boots that had cost a lot of money and were new. Quitlik had not had opportunity to observe their soles at the barracks, as the corporal had done when Krim first sat down.

Those footprints were set at an angle to each other. Tenderfoot white-man's trail.—If it were Krim, the other was the Hawk, of course. They had lost, abandoned, or given up the plane. They now had a *komitik* sled, long and narrow, Eskimo-built, lashed instead of bolted; five dogs. And a long, long start.

The tingling left Shane. His blood seemed sluggish now. He feared they were too late, but he meant to follow until he dropped.

"You think you know where they went?" he asked.

"They would make for shelter," Quitlik said. "There is none out on the muskeg, save one place. It is a stone igloo, shaped like snow-igloos, but larger, all built of stone, and very ancient. My people say it has always been there, which means back to the time when the Eskimos fought the Athabascans and made footing for themselves on the mainland. Now, that is many hundred years ago, as far back as man can remember."

It sounded like a legend, but Shane was patient. Quitlik never spoke at length without definite purpose. Anyway, the dogs needed all the rest they could snatch.

"It has been used since then," Quitlik continued, "but now no Eskimo, no Indian, will go there. It is forbidden, because of the ghosts that live there. The shamans have forbidden it. I do not think even Shappa would venture inside that stone igloo. When the Great Bear points to midnight, moans come from the igloo. More than thirty men, women and children were once killed there by the Dogribs. Perhaps their bones are inside; surely their ghosts stay there."

Shane wondered if that would bar the Hawk. He was half Indian. The white blood in him might have made him scornful of the superstitions of his mother's people. Caribou liquor might help that. He had been "outside." The Hawk, according to Quitlik, had been to Calgary, taking part in the annual Stampede. He had been hired as an actor in the big Dawson Potlatch; had for some time traveled with a vaudeville troupe. The Hawk might not be bothered by the ghosts in the stone igloo.

The old structure sounded as if it dated back to the strange stone houses on Wrangel Island, where mammoth tusks were used as arches. But it was a curious place for Krim to select as the spot where he was to render the "great service" to Kolitsin. It looked as if the Hawk had got some inkling of that service and had smelled something worth while to himself therein. Krim, Shane felt, was taking risks when he

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picked up with the Hawk, or allowed the Hawk to take him under his wing.

"HOW about you, Quitlik?" he asked. "Are *you* afraid to go near this place?"

Quitlik laughed. The Eskimos laugh twice as much as any race, civilized or savage.

"No doubt that is *igdlo ajorpok* (a bad igloo)," he said, using the native words. "There is life in all things. The spirits of the dead may have entered into the stones. But a spirit is not good or bad, save as it may be led by one who controls it. Perhaps the Hawk may control spirits, but I am not afraid of the Hawk—nor are you afraid of the other man, who is surely *ajorpok*. Therefore, we two need not fear the spirits.—I do not think that you fear anything, Shanek. Where you go, I go."

He laughed again, so spontaneously that Shane caught his infectious mirth and grinned back from his parka hood.

"Perhaps the Hawk thinks he is a shaman," he said. "Or must a shaman be the son of a shaman?"

"Not always, Shanek. If a man can go into a trance and talk with the spirits, or if he can say he has—if he has enough devil drums, and is smart enough to pick up gossip from the women—he can make others think he is the master of magic. I myself could be a shaman, if I could have fits when I wanted them."

He spoke contemptuously, glanced at the sky. The color had gone out of the Aurora. The jiggling rods were now as white as new-minted silver; the musical sound was reduced to the mere hint of clinking glass.

"There will be more snow before morning," he said, and began to make sure of the foot coverings of the dogs, which rose unwillingly; whining, not from eagerness, but reluctance.

Quitlik took place by the gee-pole and sent his long whip snaking and snapping. The leader snarled once, and the thong-tip bit through his hide. They started off grudgingly, thinking of the resting-place at Ferguson's store. They would be fed there, they were not sure of what lay ahead of them on the frozen, lonely tundra.

"Perhaps they scent the spirits of the igloo," said Shane.

"Dogs can see spirits, but I do not think they can scent them. I do not think spirits have any smell of their own," Quitlik replied. "Mush!"

He cracked his whip again, and the pace mended. Out on the muskeg, the storm had wiped out most of the trail, but there was enough left to keep them assured. Faint trace of *komitik* runners at the base of a low mound, on the lee side; here and there in a hollow.

"The white man wears snowshoes, now," Quitlik pointed out, "but he uses them clumsily. The Hawk does not leave the gee-pole.—The white man is of little use, and he is growing tired. They must have put both the sick man and the girl on the *komitik*.—The dogs have clawed deep, and the tracks show it. They went but slowly. It is not far now, Shanek. Even now, you can see the little hill on top of which is the *igdlo ajorpok!*"

Shane saw it, looming vaguely ahead. The Aurora had vanished entirely now, and the stars were trying to assert themselves through a slight mist.

THEY pushed on, the dogs panting, tails down and tongues lolling, and came at last to the foot of the little hill. It seemed artificial, not unlike a burial mound, the igloo humped at the top. In use, it would

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have been snow-covered for warmth, even if Nature had not blanketed it.

"There will be a tunnel," said Quitlik, "and it will be on this side, to the south. If you will look for it, I will attend to the dogs. They are tired, but there may be trouble."

The huskies had bunched together, tangling their leads; but they did not lie down. They seemed uneasy, hunkering down, restless.

Quitlik touched Shane on the arm, and held up his hand. A moaning sound, desolate and mournful, a wail that might be agony of body or of spirit, came from the igloo. It could not be the wind, for there was no wind.

Instantly the lead dog threw up his head and throat until the latter was in line with its front legs, and howled like a banshee. The others followed suit, in a blood-chilling clamor.

Quitlik dropped his whip, afraid that its sharp report might give an alarm. He spoke to the dogs, cuffing them, but they paid no attention to him. They continued their uncanny howling.

"Those inside may think it their own dogs," said Quitlik. "But the others will soon join in. I will feed ours; that may stop them. There may be spirits here, but there are also men."

He pointed to the top of the igloo dome. Igloos are ventilated by a tunnel coming underground into the living chamber, through an opening some four feet square. Cold air enters constantly, but cannot rise against the well-heated air of the interior, warmed by seal-oil lamps or by lignite oil shale; except as it may force some of that air through a carefully gauged ventilator about four inches square. Sometimes stoves are used, with kerosene or gasoline for fuel, and with the pipe projecting through a stove-ring sewed into a square of canvas.

But this haunted igloo of stone was bare of all conveniences, save as might have been carried there on the *komitik*. The ventilator served as chimney flue, as in the primitive days, and through it smoke was drifting.

There might be a lid to the end of the tunnel, where it came through the floor. However, that was doubtful, in a tabu lodge. When Shane got to the tunnel's limit, he should be able to stand in it with his head and shoulders well inside the room.

The frozen fish and the dogs' hunger had checked their howling, and Quitlik was carefully disentangling their lines when Shane started to crawl into the passage, where only one might travel, only one enter at a time.

CHAPTER VI.

IGDLO AJORPOK.

KRIM was inside the igloo, with the Hawk and their two prisoners. Krim's face looked as if it had been badly sunburned, though its condition was actually due to frostbite. One eyelid was inflamed, on chin and cheek-bones the bite had gone to the bone, and would leave scars. Less accustomed to exposure than the Hawk, less capable of taking precautions, Krim had suffered rather terribly.

On their arrival at the stone igloo, his face had been actually covered with a mask of ice weighing close to ten pounds. One eye had been closed under the ice; both eyes had been affected with snow-blindness, and felt as if there were sand under the lids. In the growing heat of the igloo, the warmth of his flesh, combining with that of the chamber, brought the mask off in one piece, but it left his face in painful condition; himself practically blind for the

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time. He was in no condition to take up the matter of the "great service" with Kolitsin. He was in considerable pain, which seemed to concentrate inside his skull.

For that reason—more than sufficient, but for that cause alone—Kolitsin and the girl had not been treated as other than captives until that night, when Krim's face had at last begun to respond to treatment.

The Hawk's caribou skin coats, of which he wore two, were so cut that he could withdraw an arm from a sleeve, tucking the empty sleeve into his belt, and place his hand on his bare breast until it was thoroughly warm. Then he was able to shove the hand up through the loosely cut necks of the coats, and thaw out any spot on his face that felt stiff, rewarming his hand on his breast again.

He did not trouble to watch whether Krim knew about this process or not; furthermore, Krim's clothing was not fashioned for such a purpose. And the Hawk was more than willing to let Krim find out that he knew little about the wilderness, compared to an Indian.

He did not mind the delay too much, while Krim moaned and oiled himself. Krim's face would peel; he would have sores for two or three weeks, where the frostbite had gone to the bone. He got little sleep. But the Hawk was well persuaded that it was worth while for him to wait, for the savage side of his nature derived great pleasure from gloating over the girl. If he got no other prize out of this alliance with Krim, he meant to claim her.

He said little with his tongue, but his eyes were eloquent of his intentions. The girl knew them, and so did Kolitsin—as the Hawk intended they should. He hated the Russian, personally and racially. He had nothing that could be called love for Nellie Chadwick. And he meant that his revenge should be doubled and tripled. The sating of his brutal lust with the girl would be as fierce and savage a pleasure as the torture-stake, or the scalping of an enemy.

He meant to have Kolitsin bound and incapable of motion, witness it. The Russian would suffer mental anguish that would make him as rabid as a mad dog, before the Hawk finally killed him, leaving his body in the stone igloo, or close by.

The girl's body, also, for he would grow swiftly tired of her, and he knew he could never bend her will to his.

Krim, too, might stay behind, unless Krim was needed to lead the Hawk to the final reward. For the Hawk was positive that Krim expected to reap some sort of golden harvest from Kolitsin. He had been shrewd enough to suspect that from the first. Now Krim's actions spoke for themselves; it was plain that he hated Kolitsin with a venom that was fanatical.

THE plane had gone limping south with strained struts, after its last blind landing in falling snow. It would return to a certain rendezvous at a certain time, unless it crashed on the way back. That was not likely. Folger was a good snow-flier. He did not know where the Hawk was taking Krim. He was away when Kolitsin was captured with the girl. But the Hawk knew the time and place of the rendezvous with Folger; and as he waited for Krim to get better, he fed the cruelty in himself with subtle, preliminary torture of the girl and the Russian, believing them to be in love with each other, and in his fiendish complex, hoping that they were. He plotted many things, seeking to turn them to his own advantage.

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The Hawk had a vivid imagination. It was morbid, perverted by his position, as is likely to be the case with a man made up of two distinct races, each of which in its turn was more or less mixed. He was a mongrel, with all the sharp if superficial cleverness of a cur. The strange laws of Nature's breeding mingled in him to give him most of the vices and few, if any, of the virtues of the conglomeration of types in his blood.

As Shane had seen a flying plane outlined against the Aurora, so had the Hawk. He knew now that it was the one Krim had chartered in his search for Kolitsin. That plane was coming back. When it arrived, Krim might nor might not be still alive. The Hawk pondered how he might make use of this situation.

It took money to hire a plane, and what was far more important to the Hawk, a pilot.

He recognized Folger immediately as a white crook. The Hawk had learned many things, while on his trips outside. Folger could be made to forget Krim, if he were paid for it. But as yet the Hawk had little money.—Yet money, and power, were part of his dreams.

Quitlik would have been astounded at the interior of the *igdlo ajorpok.* What bones might have been there from the ancient massacre were long since disposed of. The place seemed like a special sort of cache. There was no stove, but there was fuel; the oily shale that was better than peat, and plentiful in the Mackenzie Basin; dry wood, sun-cured caribou, canned goods, various bales that did not proclaim their contents; many native ceremonial drums, their barrels carven, headed with deerskin or with bladders.

The Hawk had no fear of the place. He had spoken of it to Krim as one who was familiar with it. Outside, there was a quantity of dogfood, frozen *sit,* or Mackenzie River salmon; big, scaly fish with yellow, oily flesh, that averaged from twenty to forty pounds.

The Hawk treated all these things as his possessions, though that attitude meant little. Krim, with his frozen face, paid slight attention to it. It was enough to know that he was sheltered and warm, and that he had what little food he craved. The idea that the Hawk was playing him never occurred to him.

He was close to the end of a long search, avid with his own desires, subordinated now because of the hard luck of his experience with the north, which ever lies in wait to snare the man who dares invade the Arctic Circle.

But his victory was in the hand. He wanted all his wits and senses about him when he began to question Kolitsin, so he tempered his pain with the anticipation of ultimate triumph. The girl meant nothing to him, save that she was bait for the Hawk, might serve as payment for his services.

KOLITSIN was on the floor, propped against the wall. The laying of the stones had been done with skill. They must have been brought from the river on sleds, and the lower tiers were flat, smooth masonry. There were some low wooden benches, and also the low, movable tables used by Eskimos for serving food.

The Russian was bound with strips of hide. He was naked from the waist up. The tattoo mark on his shoulder, and his body scars, showed plainly. He had improved, owing to Nellie's care in nursing him, but he leaned weakly. Nevertheless his eyes were

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filled with fire, partly from fever but mostly of the spirit.

The girl was also set against the curving wall, her ankles and wrists lashed. She was pale and wan, half unconscious; and now and then she moaned, partly in delirium. She had refused food, and the horror of her helplessness, as well as the fate which she felt awaited both Kolitsin and herself, in addition to the unspoken taunts of the Hawk, had beaten down her resistance.

A fire of lignite flickered in the center of the floor, its vapor reeking out through the top of the igloo. The floor draft kept it glowing, like a blacksmith's forge fire. Into the coals were thrust the heads of two native harpoons, which now showed cherry-red as Krim took them out.

The Hawk sat cross-legged; watchful, enjoying himself, watching the girl, hoping that she would come to full consciousness of what was going on.

Kolitsin eyed Krim steadily. His mien was utterly scornful. "It is all very simple, Prince Kolitsin," said Krim. "It has been a long search, but it is now ended. All delay is over. I am able to see again, and I would not miss anything. I, once your serf, as my people have been the slaves of your family for many generations, am now your master."

He waited, but Kolitsin continued to regard him with a fixed and silent scorn.

"It is true that I am of the Cheka—of the O.G.P.U.," Krim went on, his voice harsh with malice, "yet I do not bear you so much ill-will that it cannot be balanced. The Soviet is well established. Your czar and his decadent family are long dead and buried in the bogs. Your own rotten friends and relations are scattered and starving, even as you were, when I found you, subsisting on the charity of a girl. This is my bargain; tell me where the Kolitsin jewels are hidden, and you may be spared. After all, this is not Russia."

"You will not spare me," said Kolitsin. "I know your kind. You are a traitor even to the unsound oaths you have taken. You would keep me alive only to make sure of the treasure—which you will never get. Your comrades' money has brought you here, and you would betray them also. The Cheka is not your master; your own greed, rather, has you under its power."

The Hawk chuckled. The sport was good. He saw Krim wince, then quiver with rage, as he held up one of the harpoons.

"Then I must try and persuade you to tell me, since you seem unwilling.—Dog of an aristocrat, do you think you will balk me now? I spit upon you, as I do on this." He spat on the harpoon tip, which sizzled.

THE girl had opened her eyes. She gazed at the glowing point with eyes that now saw too well, and were sick with horror.

"No!" she cried. "No, you cannot do this thing!"

Again the Hawk chuckled, and Krim echoed him.

"Do not appeal to them," said Kolitsin. "They have no souls—no mercy. No power of earth or hell will make me tell where the jewels are hidden, for they are consecrated to the time when Russia shall be restored from the rabble. There are many million rubles devoted to that cause. We of the old régime may be scattered, we may starve, but we are united in that. The time is coming when the eyes of those now blinded by false promises of equality will be opened."

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"You will be dead, long before that could happen, Prince Kolitsin. And even if you keep your eyes closed, I shall sear out your sight.—But there are other things I will do first. It is not only for yourself, Kolitsin, there is also the girl. My comrade here desires her; and it my mind to reward him, if you prove stubborn."

The girl gasped, another moan came from her bitten lips.

"You cur!" said Kolitsin. "What are your pledges worth?"

Krim's chuckle grew into a fiendish laugh, the hysteria of slipping control. But he checked himself.

"Nothing, Kolitsin—nothing whatever! Only the word of Gregory Krim. You are in the net, Kolitsin. Tell me, or die slowly.—You spoke of hell. Even if there be none in the next world, as I believe, you will surely taste it in this."

The fire seemed to waver slightly, as if the draft had altered. The Hawk glanced at it, then at the opening in the floor. He saw nothing; heard nothing. It was not an unusual thing. A change of temperature, a rising wind might cause it.

It was at this moment that Quitlik followed Shane into the tunnel. The corporal crept along it inch by inch, silent as a worm, listening, his gun ready.

Krim set the crimson-hot harpoon-tip against the lips of Kolitsin's half-healed wound. He shuddered, but he did not cry out.

"That touches you, prince, does it?" jeered Krim. "I will make your marrow shrivel before I am through with you! You know the history and literature of what was once your country, Kolitsin. You will remember what the Tartars did to Michael Strogoff. This is your last chance. Tell, or—"

Again he placed the harpoon, and the smell of burning flesh was plain. Kolitsin's lips writhed back in agony; his face contorted in his effort to make no sound. But the girl shrieked, and instantly the Hawk struck her across the mouth.

SHANE stood suddenly upright in the tunnel, two feet of him in the clear. Krim saw the Hawk's eyes widen. He turned and flung the red-hot harpoon at Shane, tugging at a shoulder gun meanwhile.

There was no room in the tunnel mouth for Shane to side-step. Quitlik was close behind him, on hands and knees in the tunnel. He dodged with his head, but the harpoon went into the fold of his parka hood. It burned the fur, and clung there, leaving a brand on Shane's cheek that would mark him for life.

Yet he did not feel it then. He had no time to snatch away the harpoon. Krim's automatic was out. It belched flame and lead, in the half-lit igloo, as Shane's service revolver barked.

Krim pitched forward, his face fairly in the fire, the Mounty's bullet through his heart. Krim's slug was in the dirt.

Shane set his hands to the sides of the tunnel and vaulted into the igloo, the harpoon falling to the ground as he did so. Quitlik followed swiftly, coming out of the ground like an old dog-wolf charging from its den.

The Hawk swung up the girl and held her in front of him as a living shield, crouching behind her, his back to the wall. Quitlik tugged Krim's body aside. The hair was crisped from his skull, his face inhuman, already partly broiled.

Shane sprang to one side, fearful the Hawk might harm the girl, and afraid

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he might himself injure her if he shot. She seemed to leap toward him as the Hawk lifted her by her waist and flung her at the corporal. Still bound, she toppled, and Shane caught her, shifted her in to one of his arms . . .

Then the Hawk was gone! A flat stone, entrance to a second exit-tunnel, was closing.

Shane had barely time to thrust at it with his leg before it was level with the rest of the floor, and blocked from the other side.

Shane leaped to the tunnel mouth and dived into it. As he crawled through, he heard a sliding, grating noise. A mass of snow had covered the entrance.

He fought to get through it, furious at the Hawk's stratagem. This was no ordinary Indian he was dealing with.—He had to be careful of his gun, too, to keep the barrel clear of the tight-packed stuff.

BY the time Shane bored through into the open, the Hawk was out of sight. He had slashed loose Shane's dogs, whipped them off with the lash which Quitlik had left behind when he tackled the tunnel. Already the huskies were scattered, and they would make for Ferguson's.

Shane ran round the igloo. The snow was falling again. He could barely make out the object that swiftly raced over the tundra—the Hawk, on his *komitik,* taken from some dugout shelter which it had shared with the dogs.

They must have been harnessed to it, as if the Hawk decided to leave Krim behind, with Kolitsin, and to carry off the girl. Doubtless he had been prepared for a swift getaway. If things did not turn out as he hoped, he had meant to bestow upon Krim the order of the double-cross, provided he did not kill him outright and leave him to his fate in the middle of the tundra, without sled or dogs—a certain, even if lingering, death.

Shane would have given all his chances of promotion for a rifle. Even with one, his chance of stopping the other was slim. The whirling flakes, the inequalities of the frozen muskeg, swallowed the Hawk almost at once.

The corporal returned to the igloo. At least he had rescued Kolitsin—rather, had saved him for the girl—and he had rid the world of Krim.

But he had underrated the Hawk, and he had learned a lesson. Quitlik ought to have stayed with the dogs. They ought to have made sure of the Hawk's team before entering the igloo. Krim was a prime villain, well dispatched, but the Hawk was still a major problem.

Quitlik, meanwhile, had cut the bonds of both Kolitsin and the girl, and had flung a blanket over the former's naked shoulders. The prince—he rated that title, Shane felt now, remembering his fortitude—was feebly trying to chafe Nellie Chadwick's wrists.

Shane told Quitlik of the calamity to the dogs, and the Eskimo muttered in his own tongue, then hurried out.

Shane insisted that Kolitsin lie down. He looked at the old wound. The searing had done at least as much good as harm, he thought; at any rate the lips of the wound were not reopened.

"Once more, you came in good time, my friend," said Kolitsin. "I do not like this place."

He glanced at Krim's body. Quitlik had covered the hideous relic.

"For God's sake, let us leave!" cried the girl. "Let us get away from here—if we have to walk!"

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"Can't do that," said Shane. He spoke sternly; she was of fine temper, but she was overwrought. "I'm afraid of the weather, and you are too weak to walk.—It will take Quitlik some time to collect the dogs." He wondered, as he spoke, if Quitlik would ever be able to do that, clever as he was. "You've both got to get some food into you—now. Those are orders."

"And my dear," said Kolitsin, addressing the girl, "we shall take them. He surely deserves to be obeyed."

"I'm sorry.—I'll try."

The girl shuddered as she looked at Krim's shrouded corpse. The odor of scorched meat was going out through the smoke.

Shane brought out his torch again. He felt sure that the Hawk would have some liquor in the igloo. The girl saw the fresh scar on his cheek, and uttered a cry of pity.

"He wounded you!" she said.

"But I *killed* him," said Shane, grimly. "We'll call it quits."

HE found a wicker-covered jug of caribou. It was foul liquor, but potent with straight alcohol and native port. He made both of them take a long drink. Kolitsin swigged it like a veteran, and smacked his lips.

Almost at once, the girl began to laugh. The stuff had gone to her head. She swayed a little, and Kolitsin took her in his arms and sat down with her, soothing her.

Shane foraged for grub. There was a pot, and with snow water he could make good broth from the dried caribou. That would be best for them to begin with. If they could stand more than that, there were corned beef and beans. He was hungry himself, but he would not eat until Quitlik got back.

He left them eating and went out to see if he could help. Quitlik had minor magics of his own. He had bred that team from puppyhood, and had nursed the leader recently. He concentrated upon that one. Huskies do not come readily to the whistle, but Quitlik followed the dog, talking persuasively to him. He had taken along some fish from the sled, and at last he coaxed the beast close enough to eat. The others had halted; the idea of Ferguson's now left them, their bellies prevailing. But two of them could not be recalled.

Shane insisted that the girl ride the sled, well wrapped in blankets taken from the igloo. Kolitsin wanted to walk for a while, vowing that he felt fit. He knew how to use snowshoes, and Shane let him try it. It would help his circulation, and Shane recognized a new vitality in the man. Bolstered perhaps by pride of race.

"I have known that the Cheka would stay on my trail," he said. "They want those jewels—and many others which they will never get. When Krim does not return, they will think he may have succeeded. I do not think they will be surprised. They are not strong on trusting each other. Besides I doubt if Krim could have told them about the tattoo on my shoulder; he knew it only from having been with my family. He would hold that mark of identification to himself, for his own greedy purposes. Now, perhaps, they will try to find him. I hope they will find the same trail's end that he has—thanks to you!"

Shane did not blame him. He could not. Nor did he resent the slight suggestion of condescension in Kolitsin's manner. He was a prince—exiled, bereft of title rights but not of birthright, and talking to a corporal of police. They walked together, Quitlik at the gee-pole. It was not a strong

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wind, but it seemed to hold off the snow.

Kolitsin talked, as if he wanted to keep his mind off his physical condition. He spoke of Russia, of his hopes of royal restoration.

"It will come!" he said. "Soviet Russia seems to be doing well. They have energy, but they are false idealists. They may progress in peace, but war is coming soon. They have an army great in numbers, but they have no soldier leaders trained in war for centuries. War is a profession, whether you use gas or sabers. Success or failure only comes with experience. A thousand men who march in time to music, carrying weapons, are cheered, and exalted."

Shane made no comment on the other's optimism. "I trust," he said, "that you have not brought your jewels with you. Or that if you have, they are in a safe place."

"They are well hidden," said Kolitsin evasively. "Treasure that was left in Moscow, and other cities, has been found when houses were torn down. They are being pretty systematic lately. Some have been sold, but this is not the best time to get a price for jewels. For the present, it is well to be assured of the hiding place, and to be able to watch it."

Shane said nothing. He did not want to force Kolitsin's confidence. He could point out later that it might be well to give the safe keeping of the treasure to some acknowledged treasury, such as a Royal Canadian bank.

But he realized that Russians had their own ideas in such matters. When they once got to a haven from their present hazards, he might suggest to Kolitsin that the Hawk was at liberty, that the Hawk might plan to carry out what Krim had fumbled. And the Hawk flew high.

It was Kolitsin's affair, not Canada's. Shane touched it where the girl came in, but that was not his immediate duty. He meant to capture the Hawk; to clip his wings and cage him because of his defiance of the law.—Shappa the Shaman, on the other hand, was Shane's business.

Kolitsin began to talk a little jerkily. "Our new monarchy may be less autocratic, perhaps, than the old one. But the people are ignorant. You cannot make a boyar out of a peasant, in a dozen centuries."

His stride slackened. He began to slur the lift of his shoestraps. The girl called from the sled. She had been watching, no doubt; listening and admiring.

"I want to walk for a while," she said. "Won't you trade with me, Alexis? Are you warm now?"

She knew his true name, then, and used it intimately. Shane shrugged off that thought; said it was a good idea to change. The girl's diplomacy had a better result than anything he might have said.

They stopped to make the change. Although the dogs had been fed, they were almost played out. The soft wind, blowing gently, brought with it a scent that made Quitlik stiffen at the gee-pole and the huskies lift their sensitive noses. Shane caught it, knew it—*smoke!*

With Quitlik, he hurried to the top of the nearest rise, leaving the sled behind for the moment.

In the distance, beyond the belt of spruce about the post of the free-trader, Ferguson, a red glow pulsed, rising and falling. The store, which was also the dwelling, was on fire!

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

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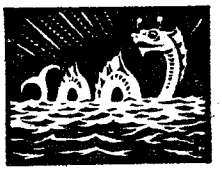
STRANGER *than* FICTION



By JOHN S. STUART

HUMAN GUINEA PIG

THOMAS HOLT offered to commit suicide in 1925, and sell his body to the University of Michigan (he was on trial for murdering his wife). The University gave him a janitor's job, then put him in a glass cage, where he was the subject of certain feeding experiments. But in April he hung himself.

BALD-HEADED WOMEN

IN the Kenya Colony, Africa, the women of the Masai tribe (deemed the aristocracy of British East Africa), shave all the hair from their heads. The warriors, on the other hand, plait their hair with wool and then rub over the matted mass red ochre, or earth.

A TREE THAT SAW LIFE

THE dragon's-blood tree is reputed to be one of the oldest varieties of trees in the world. One particular specimen was located near the town of Icod, on the Island of Teneriffe (Canary Islands). Its age was estimated between that of the Pyramids of Egypt and ten thousand years. Unfortunately, the hurricane of 1867 destroyed it. It was 70 feet in height and 79 feet in circumference, or about one-third the size of an ordinary city block. Botanically, the dragon's-blood tree is related to the lilies; it has sword-shaped leaves which grow in clusters. Formerly, the sap and bark of the tree were used by the Guanches of the Canary Islands in the process of mummifying their kings.

ARABIAN CHURN

BUTTER was an accident. Thousands of years ago, when man still roamed the earth, living in nomadic tribes, he carried his drinking milk in skins that were hung from his saddle. At the end of the journey, he had both butter and milk. To-day, in Arabia, Bedouin women still swing a goatskin under a tripod, in patient imitation of the jolting ride that first produced butter.

THE CAR THAT NEVER RAN

THE first automobile in Evanston, Illinois, was never started. It was purchased in the spring of 1909, by a professor and his wife, and it was intended for a delayed honeymoon. While it was standing in the driveway, the excitement of the approaching trip caused the professor's collapse, and he died. Ever since that spring day in 1909, his widow has kept the motor there, ready for the trip that never took place.

"WHAT BIG EARS YOU HAVE!"

IN Annam, French Indo-China, the women of the Moi tribe are regarded as beautiful in proportion to the length of their ear lobes. The first duty of a mother is to pierce her daughter's ears and enlarge the holes with wooden plugs. Next, she uses heavy rings to pull the lobes down to the shoulders. If the fleshy ribbons break, the girl becomes too ugly to marry. However, if the weighted lobes promise to reach the bosom, the maiden attains supreme loveliness.

This feature appears in ARGOSY every week

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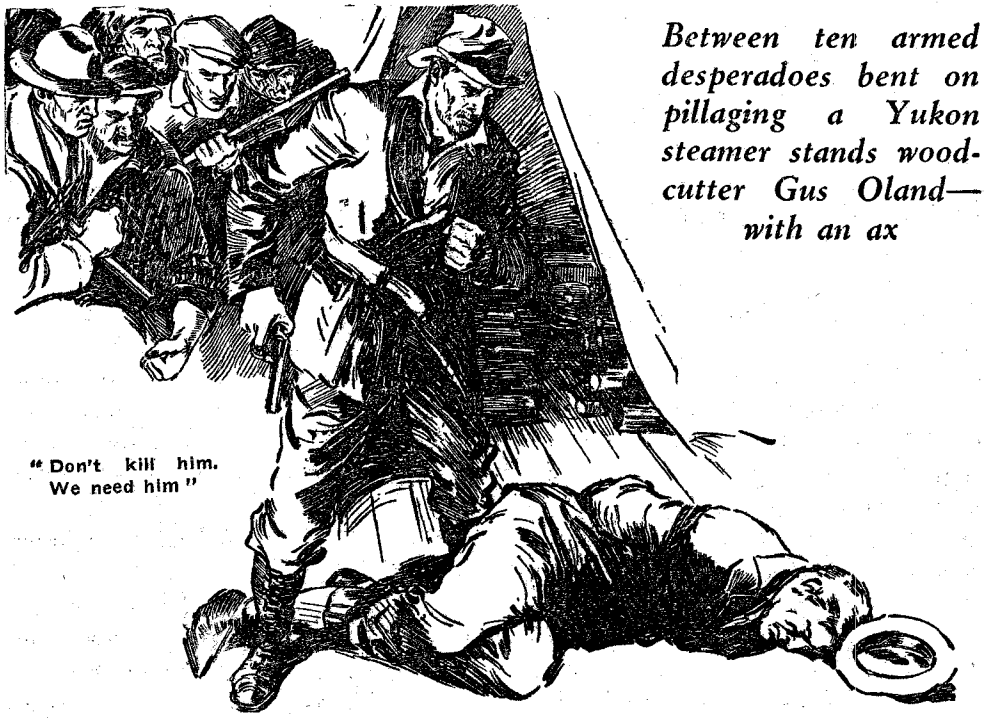
Big Gus

By CLIFF FARRELL



Between ten armed desperadoes bent on pillaging a Yukon steamer stands woodcutter Gus Oland—with an ax

THE Yukon had roused from its winter hibernation two weeks ahead of schedule, tearing off its fetters like a giant incarnate, and now to celebrate its deliverance, was off on a roaring spree through a thousand miles of its lower length.

Gus Oland stood, contentedly puffing his pipe, in the open flap of his tent which was set up on the narrow deck-space at the down-stream end of two sixty-foot barges that strained at their hawsers. The tops of trees brushed the barges, and there was an eighth of a mile of backwater and ice floes jammed among the submerged trees between him and dry land. Gus had a flatboat moored alongside to give him passage to land when he so desired.

A ceaseless parade of heavy floes wheeled by on the main river, which made a gentle horseshoe curve here and carried the pack well away from the barges, though the current could be felt. That would be the ice run from the Porcupine, which was always the last big tributary to break. It had been on for four days now, and Gus knew that another twenty-four hours or less would see the river open.

And that meant that possibly before sunset to-morrow he, Gus Oland, the Swede, would begin to cash in. About time, too. Alaska and the Klondike had not been kind to Gus. He had been "in" for nearly ten years now, and his pockets were more empty at the moment than the day he had

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landed at Dawson, a raw chechako with the blur of dialect in his speech and the power of eager, optimistic youth in his six-foot hulk of a body.

He was older now—not old as men are usually rated, but he looked well beyond his age. His blue eyes had hardened, his blunt face was rugged, and toil, hard trail and bitter winters had taken the fullness from his cheeks and shoulders, and given him muscles of phlegmatic iron toughness in place of quick pliability.

He had lost most of his accent, and *all* of his faith in humanity. He had made gold strikes and had been cheated out of them by crooked commissioners in the Klondike and by double crossing partners at Nome. He had been slugged, rolled, doped and cold-decked of his wages and his pokes in roadhouses, dives and bar rooms from Dawson to the sea. He had toiled with steam points and double jack in dismal shafts, digging out the muck that made other men rich, and he had stampeded in on a dozen starvation rushes, but he had never found wealth himself.

BUT now luck had come his way. He puffed his pipe and estimated the flood. It was at its crest. For the past twelve hours it had remained stationary.

But the river was twenty feet beyond the highest former flood stage in the memory of the oldest sourdoughs in the territory. Gus knew that it had made a clean sweep of every wood chopper's yard on the river for six hundred miles.

He cast a reflective glance at his two barges, which were chained together. They were huge, sixty by thirty feet, and now they floated with scant freeboard, for they were topheavy with three hundred cords of wood, cut to fit a steamer's firebox. Six months of back-breaking toil, with ax and power saw, twelve hours a day with no days off, was represented in that floating woodpile.

Three hundred cords, even in normal times, would be worthwhile, for wood brought forty a cord at the riverside in the early season when the rich and homesick were pouring down to St. Michael. But now, with the flood eliminating competition, wood would be worth almost any price Gus chose to ask for it.

They had laughed at Gus when he leased the two big scows at Tanana the previous fall. The others had established their wood yards as usual on the banks above the normal flood line. But Gus had sensed this flood in the fall. It had been a late freeze-up. The weather had been milder and the snow far heavier. He had gambled on a mild winter, an early thaw and a wet spring, and had loaded his wood on the barges. And now he had won.

"I will charge seventy-five a cord, by yiminy," Gus speculated aloud. Then he weakened. "Nope, I will charge only sixty-fife. That will clear me twenty thousand dollars, maybe. Then I will go back to Minnesota, buy me a farm and live easy."

In his heart Gus knew that he could get eighty—and even a hundred from some of the first boats down. The Yukon Gem, for instance. She would be the leader of the run down from Dawson by a full day. She was the fastest of the Yukon boats, and she would be coming out loaded to the texas deck with passengers, freight and gold as usual. Last year the Yukon Gem had brought three million in gold to St. Michael on her first run in the spring, part of the Dawson clean-up. A boat carrying a cargo like

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that would not quibble over the cost of fuel.

Gus knocked the heel from his pipe and rowed to shore to inspect his mooring cables that were attached to trees on a point jutting above the flood a hundred yards above his barges. Downstream the river bent sharply in to a low bluff that stood twenty feet above the floodline. A half mile below this bend the river roared through Half a River Cañon.

If the barges were to break loose, nothing could save them from being swept into Half a River, Gus knew. But the hawsers were of three-inch manila and showed no signs of wear.

It was afternoon, and a damp, misty rain was setting in as Gus returned to his flatboat. He was just stepping in when a man stepped from the brush.

GUS had seen few human faces since the previous fall, but even so this one did not appeal to him. The fellow was bearded, and his rough garb had come out second best in a siege with the brush. He carried a rifle in one hand, and the other was thrust deep in the pocket of his mackinaw. Gus knew there was a revolver in that pocket.

"Where yuh goin', square-head?" the stranger asked.

Gus did not like the look in his eyes. "Howdy," he returned uncertainly. "I think I get out of this damn rain. You ban campin' aroun' here, hey?"

"Is yore partner out there?" the bearded man asked with a jerk of his head toward the barges.

"I do not have no—" Gus began. Then sudden suspicion caused him to bite off his words.

"No partner, eh," the other cried. Then he turned his head. "All right, boys. The squarehead is alone."

The brush sprouted more men. They rose in a swarm, it seemed to a man attuned to solitude. There were ten in all.

"Yiminy!" Gus exclaimed. He cast a desperate glance around, the fear rushing upon him that they had come to take his wood.

But they had closed around him. "Take it easy," a chunky man said, stepping up. "You won't get hurt unless you get gay."

He was the leader. His body bulged with muscle. He had a corded neck and thick jaws.

"It'll be a cinch, Juneau," the first man said triumphantly. "All we have to do is hide on the barges an'—"

The chunky man who had been called Juneau turned on him furiously. "You fuzzy-brained lunkhead. I told you not to spout names. Do you want me to give yuh a silencer?"

There was respectful silence. The chunky man jerked a thumb at the flatboat. "Climb in, squarehead," he snapped at Gus. "Yo're entertainin' company."

Gus's fists had closed into knots that were as hard as mallets, and as deadly. This was the last straw. A winter's slavery and these pirates were aiming to take it away from him.

"You do not rob *me*," Gus gritted, and suddenly he went into action. Juneau, with a startled curse, gave a quick step backward, and that probably saved his life. Even so, Gus's fist reached his jaw, and the force of it hurled his body back over the end of the boat. He landed in the ice margin of the flood.

Spat! Gus had got in a second short jab at another before many arms enfolded him. He went down under the weight of four or five cursing men. He felt fists and boots beating on him,

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but their numbers protected him. A babel of panting voices arose.

"Kill 'im! Lemme at him with this knife! Grab that leg! Git his arm! Shoot him, somebody!"

Gus fought like a demon with powerful legs and fists that found targets of flesh and bone. Then dimly through the drum of his laboring heart he heard Juneau's roar of command.

"Sap him, Munk. But don't kill him. We need him."

Bam! The barrel of a forty-four struck his skull, sending a numb wave of agony over his body. Though he tried to fight it off, he lapsed into a daze.

His last conscious emotion was of bitterness at the fate that had dealt him this final scurvy trick. Six months of toil gone. It was hard to bear.

IT was nightfall before Gus emerged from the daze far enough to be surprised that he was still alive. After a time his head cleared enough to realize that he was aboard his barge. He lay in the tent. His arms were bound. A candle was burning, and the tent was packed with the ten hijackers.

Juneau saw Gus stir, and arose to stand over him. Juneau's left jaw was puffed and discolored. There was malice in his hard eyes.

"Yuh know yuh earned a bullet through yer thick head," Juneau said. "Yuh'll get it too 'less yuh use what brains there are in that chunk o' wood."

Gus said nothing. "How'd yuh like to make five thousand dollars, squarehead?" Juneau went on. "Easy money, too."

Gus scowled. "Go to hell," he mumbled. "If you think I sell you this wood for that you ban crazy."

Juneau gave a guffaw. "He thinks we jumped him to snatch his stack of kindlin'," he said, looking at the others. "Shows how dumb them Swedes are."

Gus became suddenly hopeful, but puzzled. "Listen, squarehead," Juneau said, stooping close and pointing a thick finger, "we're not after chicken-feed. We don't want your wood. We've got bigger plans than that. I'm askin' again. Do you want to earn five thousand in dust? Say yes—or no."

"If I say no, then what, hey?" Gus asked.

Juneau jerked his thumb significantly. The grind of floes and the purl of water around the barge was answer enough.

Gus grimaced wryly. "What I have to do?"

"Nothin' much—nothin' at all. I'm overlookin' that clout on the jaw yuh gave me. One of the boys has a busted rib, an' we're forgettin' that too, if you pull with us. Listen! The Yukon Gem will be pullin' in here for wood soon—to-morrow maybe. The ice is about run, an' the Gem will be a day ahead of any other tub in gettin' down this far. She won't waste time. Pete Sundvahl knows you, don't he? He's a squarehead like you, ain't he?"

"Pete knows me," Gus admitted. The Pete Sundvahl referred to was captain of the Yukon Gem. Gus and Pete had stampeded in over Chilkoot as partners in the big rush years ago.

Juneau arose and rolled a cigarette slowly. "All yuh have to do is act like yuh would if us boys hadn't never showed up," he said, eying Gus sharply. "Just stand out in the open, an' let the Gem come alongside the barge without lettin' on that we're around. That's all. Easy, ain't it?"

Gus drew a long, slow breath. So that was it. They meant to rob the

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Yukon Gem! It was a tremendous stake they were playing for. Gus knew now why there were so many in on it with Juneau. The steamer would be crowded with passengers. There would be a gun squad guarding the treasure room. It was a hold-up that required man-power and gun-power for its success. Not only that, but the mere matter of transporting that much gold away from the scene would need many hands.

THE enormity of the thing stunned Gus. He knew that attempts had been made in the past to hold up river boats carrying treasure. One or two had succeeded. The rest had failed, for it was no easy thing.

But this gang had a plan that placed the odds in their favor. By hiding among the ricks of wood on the barge they could suddenly pour aboard the steamer and have the crew and gun guards at their mercy before it was realized that the ship was in a trap.

The scheme probably would work—if Gus acted as the bait. Gus opened his mouth to boom forth an outraged refusal. He saw Juneau's eyes harden as though reading his thoughts. There was the menace of death in the river pirate's heavy face.

"Five thousand," Gus ruminated aloud. "That ban mighty little. You fallers will make much more. I lose my wood, for I could not stay afterwards, hey."

"We'll give yuh half a share," Juneau countered at once. "That's worth more than all the wood yuh could chop the rest of yer life, Swede."

Gus brightened. "I would be rich, by yiminy," he cried.

Juneau grinned, and glanced at his pals. Their expressions did not change, but Gus sensed the ironic smirks they were masking. The dumb Swede really believed they would split up with him instead of presenting him with a bullet in the back as soon as he had done his part.

"We're all set, then," Juneau said, unbending. "Might as well take the ropes off him, boys. I knew he'd come in with us. He's smart, even if he is a Swede."

Then, as Gus arose, Juneau's face became deadly again, and he pushed it nearer the tall Swede. "Remember, there will be ten guns pointed at yuh when it starts," he said. "And if yuh try to double cross us you'll never live to know what struck yuh."

Gus lay all night, unstirring but sleepless, squeezed in among them in the tent. He was glad when dawn came, for it had been the longest night of his life. He knew now how condemned men felt, and what they thought, on the eve of execution.

When he came out of the tent, he saw that the river had fallen a foot during the night, and that the ice run was over.

They were a tense, nervous lot as they breakfasted from Gus's grub box. They had their guns at their sides. All carried a brace of six-shooters in addition to a rifle, a carbine or a buckshot gun. In addition Gus saw a half a case of dynamite with caps and short fuses already set. That was to blow the safe, no doubt.

After a hasty breakfast, two of the gang slipped ashore in the flatboat, and Gus heard dogs barking back in the brush. They were equipped to move the gold back from the river, then. Even so, Gus knew they could not hope to move it any great distance at this season of the year with the snow nearly gone, and the interior a soaked morass.

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Three million in gold would weigh five tons. Their only hope would be to cache most of it and scatter until it was safe to return. There would be pursuit, though it would be perhaps a week in organizing, because of the flood and difficult communication. That would give them ample time to hide the loot and scatter.

Gus doubted if they would ever succeed in getting the gold out of the country. But that did not matter now. Gus's concern was far more immediate. Just as the pair returned aboard, after taking care of the dogs, every man suddenly went rigid in an attitude of listening. Drifting to them from a distance came a deep, hoarse, mechanical sound.

A steamboat whistle!

JUNEAU broke the spell. "It's her —the Yukon Gem," he said tersely. "All right, boys. Stow yerselves in the wood. Yuh've got plenty of time. She's a couple miles up the river yet."

He turned to Gus. The muscles in his cheeks were set so that white spots formed at the points of his jaws. "We're goin' through with it," he said. "How 'bout you, squarehead?"

"I ban a leetle shaky in the knees," Gus countered.

"Hell, we're all that way," Juneau admitted. "But we're goin' through with it, understand. Get busy an' shoot up yer flag."

Gus tied a white flour sack to the halyard of a twenty foot peeled pole he had set up on the stern, and ran it aloft.

The ten were donning masks made of burlap sacks, fitted with arm holes and slits for their eyes. Then they concealed themselves among the ricks of wood on the barges. Juneau chose a place just below the deck, piling up a few sticks of wood on the coaming to give him concealment and between which he could peer and watch the river. He was only six feet from Gus, who remained in plain view.

Again came the growl of the steamer's siren—nearer this time. Gus saw her smoke beyond the bend upstream.

Gus found himself quivering all over. The Yukon Gem hove in sight three quarters of a mile away. Gus saw the flutter of skirts, and the glint of ribbons on her decks. There were women aboard—mostly dance hall girls outbound to Seattle, probably.

Juneau saw them too. "A flock of gals on board, boys," he called. "That'll make it easy. Once we board 'em they won't do much shootin', with them women all around."

The steamer's whistle acknowledged sight of the fuel barges, and she began veering across the current, picking her way among the driftwood and heavier floes. Gus saw Pete Sundvahl's blond head leaning from the pilot house. He was helping the man at the wheel in the task of watching the ice and driftwood.

Pete waved an arm in greeting as the steamer came around in midstream, and began quartering in, her wheel slapping the water in spurts as she balanced her own power against that of the current. Pete Sundvahl was a crack skipper, and he would lay the three-hundred-foot sternwheeler alongside the barge without scraping a splinter.

Gus saw two leathernecked men, with shotguns slung under their arms and guns belted about their mackinaws, standing aft on the second deck in a little roped off space. They were part of the squad of gold guards. They eyed Gus, and then one set his gun

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against the rail and began rolling a cigarette. They were unsuspicious.

"There's a pair of gun slingers on the second deck," Juneau called softly to his hidden gang. "Get 'em first."

The steamer was two hundred yards away and nearly abeam, her prow upstream as she worked against the current.

Pete Sundvahl lifted his voice from the pilot house. "How much a cord, Gus?"

Gus cupped his hands. He was doubtful if Pete could hear him against the throb of the engine and the splash of the paddles.

"One hun'red dollar!" Gus bawled.

Pete Sundvahl leaped down to the deck of the texas and danced up and down like a madman. "You tamned fish-eatin' robber," he howled furiously. "You ban holdin' me up."

Gus still had his hands cupped to his mouth. He knew now that Pete could hear him plainly.

GUS drew a deep breath, and took a short step nearer the side of the barge.

Then he kicked the sticks of wood overside behind which Juneau was crouching—exposing the desperado to view of the steamer.

"*Robbers! A trap! Sheer off!*" Gus howled the words at the same instant.

Then he dove overside. He heard Juneau's frantic curse, and the crash of the rifle that was fired at him before he struck the chocolate-hued surface. But his move had been too fast for Juneau, and the bullet missed him.

He went down, down, down into the numbing water, and then turned to claw his way under the flat-bottom of the barge. He knew that to appear on the river-side was sure death.

The barge was thirty feet wide, and drew five feet of water, Gus was only a fair swimmer, but he had a mighty lung capacity. Even so, bright lights were flaring before his eyes, and his lungs and eardrums were throbbing before he finally found the far edge of that interminable flat bottom beneath which he had thrashed his way. He pushed his head gratefully above the surface, and gasped for air. He clung to a big bolt head as the current tugged at him, and threatened to carry him beyond the stern which overhung a few feet.

Through his pounding ear drums he heard the roar of gunfire from the barge above.

"Riddle that pilot house! Git them gun toters!" It was Juneau howling orders. "We ain't licked yet! We'll wreck her if we have to. Damn that double crossin' Swede. He never came up tuh get the bullet I had ready fer him."

Gus heard the distant tinkle of smashed glass amid the steady roar of guns. There were only a few scattered return shots fired from the steamer.

Then came a crackle of treetops downstream. Gus turned and saw an amazing sight. The Yukon Gem, her wheel still ploughing the muddy water, was careening wildly shoreward only two hundred feet astern of the barges.

Gus saw the smashed glass in the pilot house. No head appeared above the window line, and the wheel was whirling madly. The pilot and Pete Sundvahl must be lying in there dead or wounded, and in the confusion none of the crew had manned the auxiliary steering apparatus below. The engineer had also failed to act.

Women were screaming hysterically, and men were shouting. Panic had

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swept the crowded boat, and evidently the crew had been overwhelmed by the confusion.

The boat, looking huge and clumsy now that there was no brain controlling her, veered again, emerged from the trees, and was caught by the full sweep of the swifter current where it coursed in to the base of the low bluff below.

Her wheel went into reverse eventually—but too late. Gus saw the boat swing drunkenly in as though bent on dashing herself on the rocky base of the cliff. Then, suddenly she heeled over, and came to an abrupt halt, only fifty feet short of total destruction.

The steamer had grounded on a submerged knoll!

There was a sudden rush of feet above. Gus ducked under the surface, and worked his way beneath the overhang of the stern just in time. Juneau and his nine men were tumbling into the flatboat. They sculled frantically toward shore.

DOWNSTREAM, some one had taken charge of the Yukon Gem, and her wheel was flailing at the water at full reverse speed. But she did not budge. She was fast on the bar, and with a falling river beneath her she seemed likely to stay there forever.

Gus, numb from the icy water, worked his way to the ladder, and pulled himself dripping to the deck of the barge. The heavily loaded flatboat had reached dry land now, and the river pirates were racing along the curve of the flood toward the ascent to the low bluff. They had to skirt a mile of backwater to reach it. Juneau had a case of dynamite in his arms.

Gus was swearing in a hoarse, cracked voice, but he did not know it. A sick, appalled chill was upon him, for he saw the helplessness of the steamer. Her stacks were just on a level with the crown of the bluff, and it was only a biscuit toss to her texas. From the bluff the pirates would have the craft at their mercy. And they had the dynamite to force surrender.

Gus raged around, seeking a weapon, but all he found was his double-bitted ax.

He thought of Pete Sundvahl. Pete probably was dead, shot down at his post. Gus blamed himself for that. He thought with horror of the slaughter one stick of dynamite would cause on those crowded decks.

The gang was now racing up the ascent to the bluff. One, faster than the others, was already on top, and crawling to the edge to look down on the steamer. A gun cracked, and Gus saw a man leap from the pilot house, stagger and fall as the gun cracked a second time, and then drag himself down a companionway.

The paddles continued to churn futilely. All of the gang had now manned the rocky lip of the bluff. They were shouting.

Suddenly Gus went racing back over the ricks of wood. He leaped the space separating the two barges, and sped on to the upstream end where the three thick hawsers were taut as they held the loaded barges against the drag of the current.

Gus gave a final glance downstream, estimating the current. Then his ax swung in a glistening arc and bit sharp and clear. A hawser parted with a pop. He raced to the next bollard, and cut it also with one powerful swing.

The third and last went a few seconds later. The upper barge immediately began to swing out into the main current. The river caught it gleefully. It dragged its chained mate

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around with it ponderously. Gus went speeding back over the wood, leaping like a kangaroo, his ax in one big fist.

A bullet whistled past him before he reached the decked stern again. The robbers had sighted him, and evidently Juneau had guessed his plan.

A storm of lead lashed the water at the stern, and bit chunks from the deck as he poised above the bollard around which the single inshore line was made fast. A bullet glanced off the ax head as he lifted it, and nearly knocked it from his grasp.

But he balanced himself and brought it down. The hawser dropped apart. The trees began to brush the side. The two barges with their top-heavy cargo of wood were floating down the river toward the stranded steamer.

Gus leaped among the wood, and the bullets could not reach him. After a moment he chanced a peek. Some one in a white cap was waving a white rag on the deserted topside of the steamer in token of surrender. But the gang on the bluff was ignoring the steamer now and pumping bullets wildly at the approaching barges.

GUS estimated the course of his drifting, ungainly craft. Then he gave a groan. He had hoped that his barges would drift into the steamer and that their weight might force her loose from the bar. But the outward swing of the upper barge had carried both of the craft too far out into the current. They were being whirled in nearer the steamer, but Gus saw that the barges would clear the ship—by only a few yards, and that was enough to wreck his plan.

Gus's mind revolved rapidly. Suddenly he dove beneath the planked end. A big coil of spare hawser, some four hundred feet of it, was stowed there. Gus cut its lashings with quick strokes of the ax, and madly hauled out fifty feet of the bighted end.

He gave a quick glance over the deck edge again. The barges were swinging broadside downstream, with the outer one gradually gaining as it was in the full grip of the current.

The superstructure of the Yukon Gem was looming up, and it soon protected Gus from the guns on the bluff.

He threw the end of the hawser on deck, and followed it at a leap.

A huddle of passengers and deckhands jammed the freight deck where they had protection from bullets fired from the bluff.

"Ahoy," Gus bellowed as he was swept to within a scant twenty feet of the stranded steamer. "Stand by a tow line for. Make it fast. We vill drag you off the bar, yah, maybe."

He whirled once like a hammer thrower, and sent the heavy coil sailing across the short space. It knocked down a fat miner as it fell among the crowd. But a deckhand, grasping the idea, dove for it and caught it before its end slipped overboard. A moment later the bight was around a bollard on the freight deck.

Something sputtered in an arc above Gus. Then a concussion nearly broke his ear drums. Wood and splinters erupted from the outstream end of the barge. Juneau had tossed a stick of giant aboard, but the ricks of wood had protected the hull.

Gus frantically began dragging out the hawser by hand as it played out. The barges were drifting clear of the steamer, and in another second or two he knew he would be under direct fire. He needed slack to take a turn around the towing post on the stern of the barge, and the hawser was clumsy and heavy.

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The current became swifter. The barge grated on rocks then swung free.

A rifle bullet struck between Gus's mukluks as he stooped to pick up the slack. A second bullet broke his shoulder as he threw a coil over the bollard. Another clipped a button from the front of his wool shirt as he squeezed the end through the coil in a hitch that would not slip. He felt the burn of still another bullet in the flesh of his thigh as he crouched down behind the bollard.

Then the cable lifted from the water and went taut with a snap.

The barge halted with a jerk, and the muddy water of the river came piling over the deck, submerging Gus to his knees. A bullet scorched his ribs as he rose and dove overboard.

His first barge was already swamping, and the wood was floating from it as he left it.

"Six months work to hell gone," Gus muttered thickly as the water enclosed him.

HE came weakly to the surface. Then he saw the Yukon Gem, her wheel spinning the brown water under her flat bottom, backing away from the shoal.

The weight of the drifting barges had jerked her free. She was no longer at the mercy of the desperadoes on the bluff.

A sudden ripping chatter of gunfire arose from the steamer. A blocky figure rose from behind a bowlder on the lip of the bluff took a step, then reeled backwards, and fell down over the steep rocks into the boiling margin of the flood. It was Juneau.

Gus saw two more of the gang fall as they began a wild retreat from their exposed position. The passengers had joined in with the guards in blasting the pirates out of existence, and they did nearly a complete job of it before the gang could reach cover farther back, for as the steamer backed out into the river, the guns aboard commanded the sloping top of the bluff for two hundred yards.

Gus saw a deckhand leap to the hawser and cut it, for the steamer could not maneuver with the weight of the barges dragging it downstream.

Gus kept himself afloat until they picked him up. His swamped barge struck the base of the bluff not far below and turned over, spilling the last of its wood into the river. After they had pulled him aboard the steamer he pushed them aside, and stared downstream until the second barge shot into Half a River Cañon, upended and capsized also. The rapids became dark with floating wood.

"Ay slaved six month for it," Gus muttered. "Twenty thousand dollar it would have brought me, yah."

"Hell," a miner who had struck it rich, exclaimed. "I'm payin' for that kindlin' wood myself. An' I reckon there's some other jiggers on this boat that will pay yuh for it too. There's four million in dust aboard this scow—but it wouldn't be aboard now if you hadn't been a hell of a smart Swede. What did you say the price was? Two hundred a cord? That's plenty cheap."

Gus blinked. "I only say one hun'red," he protested. "But I was only kiddin', yah. Sixty-fife. That was the price."

"Did you hear him, boys," the miner bellowed. "Two hundred a cord. It's cheap at the price, I say. He's a smart Swede—when he's got time to think."

THE END

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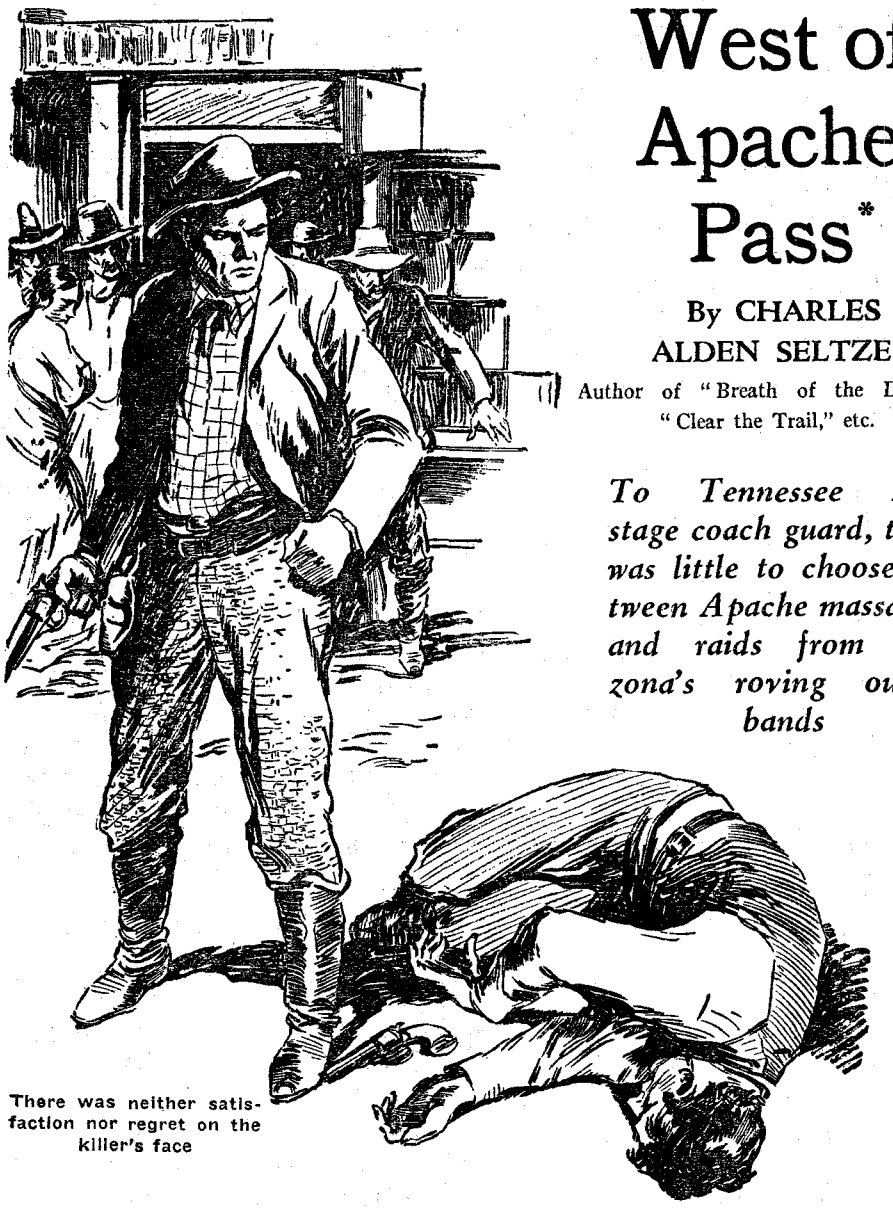
West of Apache Pass*

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "Breath of the Desert," "Clear the Trail," etc.

To Tennessee Bob, stage coach guard, there was little to choose between Apache massacres and raids from Arizona's roving outlaw bands



There was neither satisfaction nor regret on the killer's face

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

PERHAPS it was her first glimpse of Tennessee Bob Randall, chief guard of the new Arizona stage line, that made Anne Pritchard want to take a journey by stage coach. Born and bred upon the plains, she had never seen a large town, had seen little of life. And so her rancher father, Dean Pritchard, agreed to let her travel from Tucson to El Paso, where Pritchard's sister was ill. Tennessee Bob, as Anne came to know him better during her journey, was even more appealing because she knew that he had other grave duties. For he served as judge in the Vigilante trials in Tucson, where the lawless element had gone beyond control.

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This story began in the Argosy for August 4

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Traveling by stage coach was not particularly safe, although Dean Pritchard had paid well to have an extra guard accompany the stage that carried his daughter. There was always the danger from the unfriendly Apache Indians; especially those under Chief Cochise.

There was also considerable danger from white outlaws. One band of the latter was known as the Smoothfaces, because most of them were fearless youngsters without beards. Their leader was a young man called Blakeslee. However, Blakeslee refused to let his men harass white Americans, restricting his outlawry to attacks upon the hordes of Mexican bandits who constantly preyed upon the wagon trains of whites emigrating to California. The other notorious white outlaw, who was even more notorious, was Luke Malpass, who headed a gang of men who were no less than cutthroats.

Both of these outlaws, living in a land where pretty and virtuous women were few, had seen Anne Pritchard and sworn to have her. Malpass had once even gone so far as to attempt to abduct her; and she had sworn to kill him with her own hands, if it became necessary. As for Blakeslee, he was so intensely jealous of Anne's interest in Tennessee Bob that he was determined to kill the stage guard.

One incident now threatened to increase the danger to the stage line from Apache raids. Lieutenant Cabot of the U. S. Cavalry, pretending that he wanted to further peaceful, friendly relations with Chief Cochise, persuaded Tennessee Bob to get Cochise to come to the Army camp for a conference. But Cabot betrayed the trust. He hanged White Eagle and Sitting Bear, lesser chiefs who had accompanied Cochise; and although Cochise escaped, he was severely wounded.

CHAPTER XXIV (*Continued*).

INDIANS!

WHILE Blakeslee had been riding through this wilderness, convinced that he was seeing everything in a new light, he had in reality been seeing nothing. His thoughts had been so definitely centered upon Tennessee that he had not noticed the sepulchral silence that had accompanied him, that had followed him, finally to surround him. He knew Indians; knew them so well that he had grown contemptuous, even forgetful of them.

He gathered the reins in his left hand and drew a heavy six-shooter with his right. He touched the animal's ribs lightly with the stirrups and leaned over its mane.

An arrow swished past his head and sailed into the valley below him. He had moved just in time to escape sure and sudden death!

He raced for a turn in the trail, knowing that he had ridden into an ambush. He almost made the bend; in fact the horse under him, racing at terrific speed, was just making the turn when a second arrow thudded into Blakeslee's right shoulder, just below the collar bone. He swayed, straightened, gritted his teeth, and raced on down the bench to the lower country, a sandy flat lying between two great ridges.

The arrow had sunk in deeply, but had missed piercing his lungs. His breath was coming regularly, without effort, but he could feel the blood streaming down his back and over his shoulders. By turning his head slightly he could see the shaft of the missile sticking out.

An insane fury seized him. He halted the horse near the center of the sand flat and raced back, hoping to get a shot at his enemies. He saw no sign of them, however. Endeavoring to lift his six-shooter, he found that his right arm was useless, and so he switched the weapon to his left hand, wheeled his horse and sent him racing forward, toward Tucson. He had crossed the

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sand flat and was heading down a shallow gully which he knew would take him to a shallow crossing of the Santa Cruz, when he looked back over the trail and saw half a dozen Indians following him, their ponies in a dead run. They were close to town, probably several miles distant, and he knew that they hoped a stealthy arrow would bring him down before he could escape them.

He crossed the river bed, and his horse clambered up the west bank into an arroyo that intersected the river. The Indians were close behind.

They were coming down the opposite slope of the shallow as he reached the arroyo, and again he heard arrows whizzing past his head. By their appearance he had identified the Indians as Tonto Apaches. They were in war paint.

Racing out of the head of the arroyo, he was amazed to see a big gray horse, standing, with trailing reins, at the base of a huge rock escarpment. He stared around, seeking the rider of the horse, but without checking the speed of his own mount.

Then he heard the sharp crack of a rifle, and a frenzied shriek of rage and pain. The rifle cracked again—twice—three times—four times—at regular intervals, and Blakeslee knew that the marksman was using a breech-loading, single shot weapon. He halted his horse, wheeled and faced the arroyo.

Then he saw a man lying flat on his stomach on the ridge above the arroyo, aiming a long rifle toward the river bed. The weapon cracked again, and from a distance there was an answering shriek of agony.

No Indians appeared at the head of the arroyo, and so Blakeslee knew that the rifle had stopped them. He sat unsteadily in the saddle, curiously watching the man on the ridge, who was now calmly and deliberately reloading the rifle, taking careful aim and firing down into the river bed. Blakeslee knew what the man was doing; he was killing the wounded.

Blakeslee could hear the beating of hoofs, receding. Riderless ponies racing over the back trail, perhaps toward the main body of Indians.

The man on the ridge seemed to be in no hurry to leave the spot where he was lying. Undoubtedly, he anticipated that other Indians would appear and attempt to make the crossing.

Blakeslee's swaying in the saddle grew more pronounced. His eyes were glazing a trifle; he was weak and dizzy. Objects began to blur in his vision. The arrow must have penetrated more deeply than he thought. The Apaches would have got him had it not been for the rifleman.

After a time he saw that the man on the ridge was descending and coming toward him. He stared, amazed, incredulous, abashed. He was certain that he was about to recognize the man who had saved his life, but something seemed to prevent that, seemed to halt his senses upon the point of orderly reason, so that instead of saying what he intended to say, he muttered haltingly:

"You? Why, I thought—if you knowed they were after me—"

His tongue lagged, clacked against the roof of his mouth. He couldn't move it.

And something was happening to his vision. His rescuer was fading from view, seeming to recede from him and finally to blur and merge into the landscape, which was gyrating and vanishing. His thoughts were clear,

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though. He was going. The arrow had touched a vital spot, after all.

CHAPTER XXV.

ENEMIES.

WHEN Blakeslee's brain began to grasp at coherent ideas again, he became aware that he was lying flat on his back in the sand under an overhanging rock ledge. Wild brush grew in profusion around him, and through the brush he could see patches of blue sky and the stars. He knew he wasn't alone, for in the many half-conscious hours which he had spent under the ledge he had felt hands upon his injured shoulder, had felt cold water trickling over his body. Moreover, there had been moments when he was certain that he knew the man who was working over him, trying to restore him to consciousness. There had been another time when an excruciating pain had run through him. Now he knew the pain had come when the arrow had been pulled out. A hazy, agonizing period.

There wasn't so much pain now, and he was seeing things more clearly. He turned his head and saw a man sitting near him. The man was smoking a pipe, but the pipe seemed to have gone out. The man bent far forward, struck a slow-burning sulphur match, cupped the greenish-blue blaze in his hands and relighted the tobacco. Blakeslee saw the man's face, and, curiously, he was not pleased.

"So it's you, eh?" he said. "I was hopin' it wouldn't be." Bitterness and disgust were expressed in his voice.

"You're awake, are you? Well, there was a time when I thought you'd never be awake again."

Blakeslee did not answer. For a time he stared at the sky, then he tried to rise. He couldn't make it, and so he relaxed again and stared at his companion's profile, now visible to him in the effulgent glow of a rising moon.

"You're thinkin' clear now, eh?" asked the smoker.

"Pretty clear."

The smoker blew a cloud of smoke upward and removed the pipe from his lips. "Where were you when you stopped thinkin'?" he asked.

"That part's clear enough," answered Blakeslee. "They'd got me. Another quarter of a mile, and they'd have had my scalp, I reckon. You've got the satisfaction of knowin' it was you who kept them from it."

"So you think that was satisfaction, eh? If there was any satisfaction to be had, it ought to be you who was feelin' it. Me seein' them was just accidental. I was headin' south when I saw color movin' on the shoulder of a hill. In another minute I would have been behind a choya clump, where I couldn't have seen anythin'. If you're thinkin' I knew it was you, up there, you're wrong, Blakeslee. I didn't recognize you until I saw you tearin' across the creek, with the arrow stickin' out of your back. Whatever satisfaction I got out of it was because I had a chance to shoot those Tonto Apaches.—You don't owe me anythin', Blakeslee."

"I ain't aimin' to, but you've got a way of bein' where you hadn't ought to be."

The smoker laughed lowly. "It's the fever botherin' you, I reckon, Blakeslee," he said.

"Fever!" jeered Blakeslee. "I'm seein' things pretty clear." He was silent, staring at the sky but passion rioted in him. "You were ridin' south," he said. "Headin' for Pritchard's, I reckon?"

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"Yes."

"You know she ain't there?"

The pipe was withdrawn and held rigid. "She's in El Paso, Blakeslee."

"I know that. I stopped at Pritchard's last night."

The smoker laughed again. "Last night?" he said. "I reckon not, Blakeslee. Last night, and the night before, you were lyin' right where you are. If you came straight from Pritchard's you must have been there three days ago."

"Do you mean to say you've been nursin' me for more than two days?" demanded Blakeslee.

"Yes."

"Hell!" He was silent again. Then he said bluntly, "Why was you headin' for Pritchard's?"

"I was aimin' to deliver a letter to Pritchard."

"From Anne?"

"Yes."

THINGS would never work out for Blakeslee, it seemed. If he had not decided to ride to Tucson that day, or if he had delayed a couple of hours, or if he had taken a western route, it would have been the man who was now seated beside him who would have fallen victim to the red devils who had been lying in wait near the trail, and not Blakeslee.

"You was always lucky, Tennessee," he said. "I'd been to Pritchard's. He'd joshed me about you and Anne. I was seein' red and aimin' to kill you on sight.—Look what happens!"

Tennessee resumed smoking. He did not answer.

"What became of the Apache?" asked Blakeslee, presently. His voice was steady now.

"Scared off, I reckon. A small war party. I think I wiped them out."

The night lengthened. The two men were enemies—one of them prone, weak and drawn from a two-day fight for life, stared up and out; the other, strong and healthy, his vitality unimpaired, sat calmly smoking his pipe.

"So you rode to the San Simon with her, eh?" came Blakeslee's voice, the jeering note still in it.

No answer from Tennessee.

Blakeslee writhed, groaned with pain. "Not sayin' anythin', eh?—Well, don't, damn you! I reckon I can guess."

The trouble was that he couldn't guess. There was a maddening doubt to torture him. Certainly Tennessee—or any man, for that matter—would be attracted to Anne, and Anne, woman-like, would respond to a man's interest in her. But how deep had Anne's interest in Tennessee been? That interrogation tortured Blakeslee.

"It don't make any difference to me!" he said. "I'm not interested in what's happened in the past. But I'm tellin' you this, Tennessee—Anne Pritchard's my gal. I've knowed her for two or three years—long before you and the damn stage line ever thought of comin' here. I picked her out and I aim to have her, and if you get in my way I'll kill you!"

Still no answer from Tennessee.

TENNESSEE sat gazing out into the moonlit desert. After a while he got up and moved about in the shadows of the ledge; and finally he strode some distance away, and with hands shading his eyes gazed eastward against the moonlight, toward Tucson.

Back under the ledge Blakeslee stirred. Painfully and slowly he raised himself to his elbows and watched Tennessee. Then, muttering incoherently, groaning with pain, he turned over, stretched out an arm and gripped

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the stock of a rifle which had stood against the rock wall below the ledge. He drew the weapon to him, broke it, saw that there was a cartridge in the firing chamber. Lying on his right side, the wounded side, which throbbed with agonizing pain, he lifted the rifle and leveled it at Tennessee.

The muzzle wavered uncertainly. It took him a long, long time to steady it. But when he was ready to press the trigger he shuddered, laid the rifle in the sand beside him, and stretched out on his back again.

Presently Tennessee returned and resumed his seat on the rock under the ledge. Blakeslee closed his eyes and pretended to sleep . . .

Dawn came. Blakeslee had been asleep, for now a sound awakened him and he struggled, lifting himself again to his elbows. Out upon the level in front of him he saw a team of horses hitched to a bed wagon. A man, apparently the driver, was talking to Tennessee. The driver was scratching his head. Both Tennessee and the driver were close enough for Blakeslee to overhear them. The driver was talking.

"I got hyar as soon as I could," he was explaining. "Tatro didn't bring me word till nigh mornin'—So it's Blakeslee, eh? And he's hurt bad, eh? Wal, if that's so it was mighty lucky for him that Tatro happened to be ridin' to town from that thar mine of hisn. As it was, he mighty near forgot to tell me. Just happened to think of it, he said. Wouldn't have thought of it at all if somebody hadn't said somethin' about the stage. That got him to thinkin' of you, and he remembered he'd met you hyar. Wal, let's git him loaded."

The driver reached into the depths of the wagon and pulled out a stretcher constructed of a blanket lashed to slender poles. Following Tennessee, he placed the stretcher near Blakeslee and helped Tennessee lift the injured man.

Watching Tennessee closely, Blakeslee saw him look at the rifle. Tennessee smiled.

Ten minutes later Blakeslee was in the bed wagon and headed toward Tucson, while Tennessee, riding the big gray horse, was vanishing from view over the level stretch of desert, southward.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HELL IN ARIZONA.

AT the stage station, with a crowd of interested people around him, the driver of the westbound stage listened attentively to the story of Blakeslee's escape from the Tonto Apaches and to the recital of Tennessee's part in the affair. Blakeslee had talked, and Blakeslee was out of danger. Tennessee's nursing had saved him.

"Had a bresh with the Tontos, eh?" said the stage driver. "Wal, it seems the varmints has got all stirred up ag'in, sence Lieutenant Cabot made a fool of hisself by hangin' Cochise's friends. Them Army men is dumb, peers like! Cochise got back to his village. One of his laigs was busted by a rifle bullet, and I heerd tell he said that before he got through he'd kill ten white men for Sittin' Bear and ten for White Eagle.—And mebbe he'll lift Lieutenant Cabot's skelp before he gits done. He waited till his laig got well, and then he commenced to buzz around. A ranchman, detachments of so'jers and the emigrants is gettin' shot full of arrers."

"Tennesseee ain't so tickled at the

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way Lieutenant Cabot double-crossed him," declared Eggleston.

"Bein' a Army man saved Lieutenant Cabot, I reckon," said a bystander. "Folks don't go around double-crossin' Tennessee without bein' fotched up at."

"Shore, you're right.—But how will Cochise take it? I heerd that Tennessee give his word to Cochise. Now I reckon Cochise's braves will try to lift Tennessee's hair."

"They ain't raided no stages lately, is they?" inquired a man in the group.

"Not lately," answered Eggleston. "It ain't likely they'll tackle a stage in Apache Pass, 'cause the so'jers go through, every trip."

"Where's Blakeslee now?" asked the stage driver.

"He's over in Charlie Brown's hotel."

Some one laughed. He was a tall man, a stranger to the others. "When I was hyar last year Charlie was tellin' me about how he was goin' to build a hotel. He aimed to give it a high-soundin' name. I reckon he done it?"

"He shore did. He's called her 'The Congress.'—Look hyar." The speaker pointed to a building, square and two stories in height, visible through a clear space between two other buildings.

"Shore enough, he done it. Thar she is, purty as a pitcher! Derned if Charlie didn't make good! But I'll bet it's more gamblin' house than hotel."

"It's both."

THE Congress Hotel had been finished only recently. It had glass in its windows; wooden floors in its big lower room, which was utilized as both barroom and lobby; a mahogany bar with a row of shelves behind it, filled with bottles of liquor with various labels. The walls were adorned with colored lithographs, calendars, a deer head. A stairway ran from the lobby to the second story. Floors and steps were bare. Dust, fine, light, feathery, floated in and covered everything.

"That's one thing about this hyar kentry," said a bearded man standing at the bar, drinking with a crowd of friends. "Thar's so much dust that a man's always thirsty. The water ain't fitten to drink, only in the spring when she comes down from the mountains, and then she's so doggoned muddy she looks like coffee.—Who found this hyar Arizony, and what's it hyar fer?"

A friend laughed.

"I reckon Charlie Brown kin tell yuh. He knows more about Arizony than any man in it. Why, he's even writ a poem about it. Come over hyar and I'll show yuh."

He led the stranger to the wall at the front end of the bar where, framed, appeared the following:

The Devil was given permission one day,
To select him a land for his own special sway;
So he hunted around for a month or more
And fussed and fumed and terribly swore,
But at last was delighted a country to view
Where the prickly pear and the mesquite grew.
With a survey brief, without further excuse
He took his stand on the Santa Cruz.

He saw there were some improvements to make,
For he felt his own reputation at stake;
An idea struck him and he swore by his horns
To make a complete vegetation of thorns.
He studded the land with the prickly pear
And scattered the cactus everywhere.
The Spanish Dagger, sharp-pointed and tall
And last—the choya—the worst of all.

He imported the Apache direct from Hell,

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And the ranks of his sweet-scented train to swell
A legion of skunks, whose loud, loud smell
Perfumed the country he loved so well.
And then for his life he could not see why
The rivers should carry more water supply,
And he swore if he gave them another drop
You might take his head and horns for a mop.

He filled the rivers with sand till they were dry—
And poisoned the land with alkali—
And he promised himself on its slimy brink
The control of all who from it should drink.
He saw there was one more imp to make.
He imported the scorpion, tarantula and rattlesnake.
For all who might come to this country to dwell,
Would be sure to think it was almost hell.

He fixed the heat at 107
And banished forever the moisture from Heaven.
But remembered as he heard his furnace roar
That heat might reach five hundred or more.
And after he fixed things so thorny and well
He said—"I'll be damned if this don't beat Hell!"
Then he flapped his wings and away he flew
And vanished from earth in a blaze of blue.

And now, no doubt, in some corner of Hell,
He gloats over the work he has done so well,
And vows that Arizona cannot be beat,
For scorpions, tarantulas, snakes and heat,
For with his own realm it compares so well
He feels assured it surpasses all HELL!
By Charlie Brown

"Wal, durned if he ain't a pote!" declared the stranger. "And she shore is thet kind of a kentry. Only"—here the man scratched his head meditatively, and gazed out of the doorway into the sunlight—"only thar's somethin' else hyar, too. That pome only tells about the things that irritate a man; about the way his body feels. Thar's somethin' he got in that pome. I reckon what he's missed is what's in yore mind when you think of how big she is and how sunshiny, and how beautiful she is in the evenin', fer instance, when the colors of the sunset is spread over her and she's adrowsin', sort of. Then she's so damn peaceful thet she makes a man feel like he's in church, whar thar's a lot of room, and all the silence you want. I don't know jest what it is, but it's somethin' thet makes a man want to stay hyar; and if he's away it makes him want to come back."

The man gulped hard, grinned. "Let's go drink," he invited.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LETTER CARRIER.

THE Tonto Apaches did not bother Tennessee as he rode into the silence. However, he was troubled by thoughts of Blakeslee.

Two years. That was the time Blakeslee had mentioned, and Tennessee gravely considered it. Blakeslee's two years had no doubt been long. Anne wasn't the kind of a girl to encourage a man. She'd play square.

Many times as he rode through the lonely land he took from a pocket the letter from Anne to her father and thoughtfully inspected it. The penmanship aroused his admiration. The one letter she had written him had been exceedingly formal; she had not even hinted of what had happened in the stage coach there on the desert, east of Apache Pass. He didn't expect Anne to mention anything in the

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letter; she was too bashful. He himself never would be be able to tell how it had happened. He had never thought that he could be so courageous. The miracle was that she had returned his kisses.

He rode wide around some mountains, for there might be Apaches lurking near them; and later he sat motionless in the saddle scanning a gorge which he would have to negotiate presently. Still no Indians. Nothing but the sandy bed of the Santa Cruz, growing narrower and narrower as the land sloped upward.

When at last he rode down into the valley near Dean Pritchard's ranch house he experienced a sudden pang of loneliness, and the distance back to El Paso seemed endless.

The sentinel on the ranch house roof was not alarmed by the appearance of a lone rider. He merely leaned over the parapet wall and seemed to call to some one below. Here and there a gardener stood erect, face hidden under the broad brim of a steeple straw hat; and as Tennessee rode nearer he heard voices traveling ahead of him as the members of the guard communicated to one another.

Presently he was seated in the big patio, drinking from an olla, while Dean Pritchard, the letter spread open in front of him, was seated at a table, reading. Tennessee's curiosity was acute, yet he maintained a discreet silence; and after drinking, he turned and gazed familiarly out over the valley of the Santa Cruz into the hilly country toward Callabasas.

PRITCHARD laid a broad, sinewy hand upon the letter. He looked at Tennessee.

"She's well," he said. "And Milly's better." He gazed steadily at Tennessee, with bafflingly empty expression. "Anne ought to stay in El Paso," he said heavily. "Thar's a lot of them Army officers thar, but she'd be safer with 'em than travelin' through the Apache kentry."

"You're right, Pritchard."

"Do you mean you want her to stay thar?" growled Pritchard.

"I wouldn't be able to prevent her from stayin'," answered Tennessee.

"You're right, you wouldn't! Anne's got a mind of her own." He gazed hard at Tennessee and his eyes kindled with a quizzical light. "You rode guard clear through Apache Pass with Anne," he said. "Mebbe you talked to her. For certain, you looked at her plenty; you couldn't help it.—What's your idea of Anne?"

"She's a wonderful girl, Pritchard."

"Just an ordinary gal, Tennessee. An' don't fool yourself.—She don't think anythin' of you."

"I don't know that I blame her," said Tennessee. His face paled a little, then reddened and he stared glumly at the floor of the patio. Had Anne's attitude changed? Had she experienced a revulsion of feeling toward him? Well, he couldn't blame her; he had been rather impulsive that day. Perhaps she regarded him as rude. And there was that conviction of unworthiness that he had felt right along.

"Humm," grunted Pritchard. "She don't think much of you as a guard. Says you rode most of the way in the stage with her. Says you're very interestin'. It's curious I never noticed that, Tennessee. She wants to know if I've seen you.—Well, I'm lookin' at you, and all I can see is a man that's been fool enough to ride all day, bringin' me a letter with nothin' in it except a lot of mush about you.—I reckon I'll write and tell her that she's foolish!"

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Tennessee was smiling. "When's she comin' home, Pritchard?"

"Pretty soon, I reckon. Says she's lonesome in El Paso. — Lonesome! How could a girl be lonesome among a lot of Army officers, Tennessee?"

"She could be lonesome if she doesn't like them, Pritchard."

"Bah! You set thar and try to make me believe that you don't know what's the matter with her?—'I think I shall start home pretty soon,' she says in her letter. 'I keep thinking about how beautiful everything is along the Santa Cruz.'—Holy Moses! Beautiful! Why it's only a couple of months ago that I caught her lookin' at the kentry with an expression on her face thet said, plain as day, thet the kentry she was lookin' at was nothin' but a stretch of hell! She don't like Texas, she says. Do you know why, Tennessee? It's 'cause you're in Arizona."

"She's a wonderful girl, Pritchard, and if she likes Arizona better than Texas, I believe her."

"I believe you're a couple of damn fools!" laughed Pritchard.

Both men became silent, staring at the dry bed of the Santa Cruz, wondering how any one could call it beautiful.

PRITCHARD'S brow was thoughtfully furrowed.

"I ain't in no wise satisfied about Anne bein' in Texas," he said. "I'd feel a whole lot better if Lieutenant Cabot hadn't made a fool of hisself. Cochise is goin' to think you had a hand in it, Tennessee, and the stage line will ketch hell. When I heerd that Lieutenant Cabot had played that scurvy trick on you, and had hung Sittin' Bear and White Eagle, after shootin' Cochise, why I sort of expected to hear that you'd killed Cabot. —What kept you from doin' it?"

Tennessee shook his head. "Cabot made a mistake, of course. But an Indian is an Indian, Pritchard. And Lieutenant Cabot is a soldier of the United States Army. I reckon there's a difference, suh."

"I reckon thar is, Tennessee," conceded Pritchard. "But look what Cabot's done to you! Every Apache west of Apache Pass will be lookin' for you now. The Chiricahuas, the San Carlos and the Tontos. What Cabot done can't be explained by you."

Tennessee was Pritchard's guest, and he was made to feel welcome. It was the first time he had visited the Pritchard ranch, and he spent several hours riding through the valley, accompanied by his host, who pointed out various spots of interest. At last, while both men sat on their horses near the river, the old rancher described Anne's battle with the Apaches which had resulted in the death of Tony.

"I reckon she'd do just that," declared Tennessee, his eyes gleaming with admiration. "She'd almost killed Luke Malpass, the night he raided your wagon train," he added.

Later the men sat on the roof of the ranch house, smoking.

"Blakeslee was hyar the other day," said Pritchard.

"I heard that."

"Blakeslee tell you?"

"Yep."

"Shucks. I thought you'd come straight from Tucson."

"I did."

"But Blakeslee rode west from hyar, toward Quijotoa. The Pichacho Kid was with him."

"Blakeslee was alone when I ran into him. It wasn't far from the Tumacacori. A small war party of Tonto Apaches had ambushed him."

He told the story of the fight and of

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Blakeslee's rescue, for he felt that Pritchard's interest in Blakeslee demanded that he tell it. When he finished Pritchard smoked in silence for a time.

"Look hyar, Tennessee," he said. "Thar's somethin' I've got to tell you. I reckon I wouldn't hev told you if you hadn't done what you done for Blakeslee. I told you that Blakeslee was hyar. He was. Anne's name was mentioned. He's loco about her; I seen thet. Mebbe it would hev been a good thing fer you if that Apache arrer had sunk a little deeper.—Blakeslee's all right, but he's a wild man. He's got good qualities, but he's got more bad ones." He chuckled. "Blakeslee's the kind thet would cut the throat of a man thet stood between him and his gal, but he can't very well do thet to you, now, sence you saved his skelp.—You didn't run into any more Tontos comin' down?"

"No."

SHORTLY after dawn, the following morning, Tennessee rode north, following the course of the Santa Cruz. He bore with him a letter from Pritchard addressed to Anne, which he would mail at Tucson. Pritchard confided to Tennessee that he had advised Anne to remain at El Paso for a time, on account of the activities of the Apaches.

Far up the Santa Cruz, where a faint trail from the Camina Del Diablo intersected the Tucson trail, Tennessee saw a dozen horsemen sweeping toward him out of the hot desert country. White men.

He halted the gray horse and waited for them to come up, and when they drew near he recognized them as Blakeslee's riders. The Pichacho Kid was among them. The riders recognized Tennessee, and swarmed about him, greeting him as a friend.

"So you're wanderin' from the stage trail, eh?" said the Pichacho Kid.

They knew they ought not to question him; questions concerning a man's activities were unethical, even impolite. Yet their eyes were agleam with a curiosity which Tennessee observed. He knew they were wondering about Blakeslee.

"I took a letter to Pritchard," Tennessee informed them.

"From Anne, I'll bet a hoss!" declared one of the riders.

Tennessee nodded.

"Me and Blakeslee was down to Prichard's the other day," said the Pichacho Kid. "When we started away Blakeslee sent me back to the cache. He rode up the Santa Cruz toward town.—You see him thar?"

"Yep."

The Smoothfaces seemed to be relieved. The strained curiosity in their eyes vanished, and was succeeded by satisfaction.

"We shore thought somethin' had happened to Blakeslee," said the Pichacho Kid. "He told me he'd be hittin' the breeze back the next day.—I reckon he's raisin' hell in town!"

Tennessee shook his head.

"I'm sorry to tell you, boys, that your boss won't be raisin' any kind of hell for a couple of weeks." As briefly as he could, he told them of the incident of the attack by the Tonto Apaches; and when he finished, although he hadn't told all, the outlaws had pieced together the broken threads of the story.

"So you had him took to town in a bed wagon, eh?" said the Pichacho Kid. "That means he was hurt bad.—But you said you was ridin' to Pritchard's with a letter, and you wasn't

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draggin' no bed wagon with you. Looks like the boss was hurt so bad you couldn't carry him on your hoss or hisn.—Where did you get the bed wagon?"

TENNESSEE told them about Jed Tatro; how he had seen Jed riding the west bank of the Santa Cruz and had sent him to Tucson for the wagon.

"How long you been comin' from Tucson?" asked the Pichacho Kid.

"This is the sixth day."

"You stayed one night at Pritchard's, eh? And you're still most a day's ride away. That means you stayed with the boss for pretty near three days." He stared hard at Tennessee. The Smoothfaces exchanged eloquent glances. And then, rather shyly, his face reddening with embarrassment, the Pichacho Kid added, "Thank yuh!"

"I reckon we'll go to town and take a look at the boss," said a rider.

They accepted without question their right to accompany Tennessee, and so the entire cavalcade rode north, through the wild, yawning desert country toward Tucson. They talked little and their bronzed faces were grim. When they reached the section where Blakeslee had been ambushed, they asked Tennessee to describe the scene again. He did so, pointing to the spot where he had concealed the gray horse.

The Smoothfaces plunged their horses into the dry bed of the river and raced hither and yon searching for the bodies of the Apaches. But the bodies had been removed, and thus they knew that the band of warriors had been larger than Tennessee had suspected. They had returned to remove their dead, although here and there in the dry sand of the river bottom were the imprints of the bodies of Tennessee's victims.

The riders crowded around Tennessee and congratulated him. "You shore busted hell out of 'em!" declared a fierce-eyed young Smoothface. "Thar was six of 'em."

They were interested in the ledge which had sheltered Tennessee and Blakeslee during the period of Blakeslee's unconsciousness and Tennessee's vigil, yet they added nothing to the bald, "Thank yuh!" that the Pichacho Kid had bashfully muttered.

After a time they rode on into the dusk that was now descending, and when at last the lights of Tucson came into view they rode across the Plaza to the hitching rail in front of the Congress Hotel, where they quietly dismounted.

"We'll tell the boss we seen yuh," said the Pichacho Kid.

"Sure. He'll be interested in knowin' that I got to Pritchard's without runnin' into any more Apaches," answered Tennessee.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

INVITATION TO A MURDER.

DURING the days of Blakeslee's convalescence there were always several members of his band nearby. However, they continued their depredations and held occasional meetings in Blakeslee's room in the Congress Hotel, where, if one cared to listen, one might have heard reports of the band's activities as well as discussions of prospective enterprises.

The days dragged for Blakeslee, in spite of the fact that some of his Smoothfaces were always near him. His thoughts were upon his problem—

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that of winning Anne Pritchard. Associated with that problem was another which tortured him—murder. For it seemed to him that in spite of his obligation to Tennessee he would have to kill the man, and he wondered if he could do it. Certainly the impulse was strong; but conscience, which seldom bothered him, must now be considered.

He had heard that Tennessee had gone to Yuma three weeks ago, and he had heard nothing of him since. He hoped the Indians had got him. No such luck.

He had heard no word about Anne Pritchard, of how long she would still be away or when she would return. But from where he usually sat on the veranda he could see both the stage station and the Maricopa trail. He could see the westbound stages as they came in, as well as the eastbound; and several times, after the arrival of a westbound stage, he had sent a member of his band to the station to inquire about Pritchard's mail. So far, he had gained no information whatever, and to-day, shortly after noon, he was sitting on the dust-covered veranda staring moodily out into the blazing sunshine. In another week he would be able to ride. Then, if Anne had not yet started back, he intended to go to El Paso.

To-day the Pichacho Kid was with Blakeslee. The Kid had spent most of the day at the Congress bar, and now he suddenly appeared in the open doorway behind Blakeslee. He swayed a little, and in his eyes there was a truculent light.

"I'm gittin' fed up on town," he said. "I don't like this oiler talk. I'm yearnin' for somebody to say 'yes, sir,' to me in plain American." His eyes glowed fiercely.

"You're drinkin' too much, Kid," smiled Blakeslee placatingly. "Set over here where the sun can boil it out of you."

The Kid regarded Blakeslee with an appraising, friendly gaze. "Damned if you ain't a patient guy!" he complimented. "Here yuh been settin' fer six weeks, and still you ain't kickin' about it.—Nothin's happened except a couple a knifin's."

"Somethin's goin' to happen, though," declared Blakeslee, and his eyes gleamed with sudden interest. "Look there," he directed a nod toward the street. "Slim Atwell—Bill Atwell's brother."

"Well, what of it? Sim Atwell don't mean nothin' to me."

"Nor to me, either, far as that goes. But there's somebody in town that Slim Atwell does mean somethin' to. Texas Larkin has swore to kill every member of the Atwell family that he runs into, 'cause of Bill Atwell killin' his brother Bud. Texas set a heap of store by Bud. There wasn't nothin' he wouldn't do for Bud, and he followed him around like a locoed hen follows one of its chicks. You heard how Texas salivated Bill, in Tennessee's cou't room; and last night, in the Congress bar, he allowed he wouldn't require a cou't room for the next killin'. Slim Atwell's been down Durango way, and I reckon he's just heard of the killin' of Bill."

"Is Slim a fighter?"

"They tell me he ain't for to be monkeyed with."

The Pichacho Kid seemed to sober, and his eyes gleamed with a new interest. "Texas Larkin is in the Congress right now, drunk," he said. "Mebbe I'd better tell him that Slim Atwell is in town."

"He'll find that out soon enough," said Blakeslee, dryly.

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"Meanin' what?" questioned the Kid.

"Can't you see that Atwell is headin' for the Congress? Look at him now. What's he stoopin' and lookin' around for—and pickin' his way, cautious like? Some one's told him that Texas is lookin' for him. Well, I'll bet he don't rush into the Congress, headless like!"

Both men were silent, watching Atwell, who was a tall, slender man with a heavy, drooping, black mustache, long black hair and a prominent nose. Undoubtedly his questing attitude disclosed his knowledge of what impended, for he held his head low, as if peering into windows and doors, and his nostrils seemed to sniff the atmosphere.

"Boss, yo're shore right. Peers like the Atwell fambly has got the aidge."

"It shore does." Blakeslee was calm and philosophic. "Well," he added, "when a man's lookin' for trouble he'd ought to be ready when he finds it."

"Huh!" breathed the Kid. He was tense with interest. His face was pale. "I'd shore hate to see Texas git plugged," he added. "I don't blame him for gittin' on the prod that away and startin' out to bust up the Atwell fambly.—Mebbe I could let him know that Atwell's hyar."

"You set still, Kid. If you go to movin' now Atwell will know somethin's up. Texas is playin' his hand, and if he's stacked the cards ag'in himself, that's his business."

BY this time Atwell had reached a point in the street directly in front of the Congress. He stood there, hands on hips, his head shoved forward as if he were attempting to gaze into the hotel through the open doorway. He wore two heavy six-shooters, and a belt bristling with cartridges.

Blakeslee and the Pichacho Kid gazed inquiringly at each other. Something had happened. Something unusual, ominous, startling. It was in the atmosphere; there was a flat, dead silence. Only a few minutes before the barroom of the Congress had been humming with noise—the scuffing of feet, the clinking of glasses, laughter, voices. But it was still now.

Turning his head a little, Blakeslee could see the figures of men standing well back in the doorway. He could dimly discern their faces as they stared out of the doorway into the street. He could see other faces in the window.

"Texas saw him comin'," he whispered to the Kid. "Either he's sneaked out the back way and will meet Atwell in the street, or his friends have hid him, until he gits sober. It's likely they've hid him."

It seemed that Atwell had also discovered the silence, for he stood motionless, as if anticipating a shot from the doorway. Then, after he had stood there for a full minute and no shot came, he began to move mincingly sidewise, heading toward the corner of the building nearest Blakeslee and the Kid. Peering around the corner, and evidently seeing no sign of the man he sought, he grinned felinely at the two men on the veranda.

"He's snuck away!" he charged. "I heerd tell he was in thar—and thet he was lookin' fer me." He straightened, yelled out: "Texas Larkin, ef yo're in thar I call on you to come out and git yourself killed!"

No answer. No sound.

"I'll fight you fair," yelled Atwell. "I don't hev to corral you in no cou't room without your guns. You kin come out of thar with your guns blazin'!"

It was quite evident that Atwell did not see what Blakeslee saw. Blakeslee

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was facing the far end of the veranda, and he had seen a man lurch into view around the corner of the building and sway outward toward the street. Intent upon the doorway, Atwell was unaware of the fact that his enemy was now in the street, at his right, and facing him.

Perhaps the expressions upon the faces at the windows apprised Atwell that something unusual was happening. For an instant he stared at the faces in a puzzled manner. Then, obviously suspecting some trickery, he whirled to face Texas, who was now standing in the street not more than twenty yards distant.

Texas was unsteady on his feet, but his manner was belligerent. He had drawn the heavy six-shooter out of the holster at his right hip. It dangled limply in his hand as he teetered back and forth on his toes and looked at Atwell.

Atwell made no sound. When his wheeling motion ceased he had drawn a gun. Its roar rocked the air on the veranda.

Texas did not fall. Slowly, with a deliberation that seemed almost extravagant, he raised the heavy six-shooter in his right hand to a level, and calmly sighted it.

ATWELL'S gun was roaring thunderously, and if its bullets were striking Texas, he gave no sign. When Texas pulled the trigger Atwell stiffened and shuddered. The gun in his right hand was now empty, and so wildly, desperately, he jerked the gun from the left holster. Twice, in a frenzy of haste, he fired at Texas before Texas, still deliberate, fired again. Then Atwell wheeled, slumped sidewise, and seemed to go down.

Nevertheless he stiffened, straightened, and fired again—three times in rapid succession.

Texas, as if unaware of the fact that Atwell had been shooting at him, again took deliberate aim; and with the thunderous boom of his gun Atwell tumbled forward, landing upon his face, his right arm awkwardly doubled under him, his left extended straight out from his body, and his legs sprawled limply. The veranda of the Congress became suddenly filled with men from the barroom. But Blakeslee and the Pichacho Kid had not changed their positions. Some dogs had appeared and were excitedly barking.

Texas was now sober. He walked forward and stood over Atwell, looking curiously down at him. Calmly he poked the spent cartridges from the cylinder of his six-shooter, reloaded the weapon, and stuck it back into its holster. It was a saturnine visage that he turned toward the veranda of the Congress. No satisfaction, no regret, no emotion whatever appeared there; only his eyes showed the bitterness that must have seared his soul because of the killing of his brother, whom he had loved in whatever fashion was peculiar to his character.

Drunk, Texas had been more than a match for a sober man with a more rapid draw. The difference between them had not been in the quality of their marksmanship, but in the cold deadliness of Texas Larkin's determination. His fear of death was so slight that he could face it unmoved; he had not been afraid to take deliberate aim at his enemy.

Something similar to this was expressed in Blakeslee's conversation with the Pichacho Kid as Texas reentered the Congress barroom.

"Texas gets 'em," he said. "There ain't no show work in him, but you

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can bet that when he shoots he's got a bead on you!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

RECRUITS.

THE blazing sun, shimmering with white-hot heat, touched the edge of the veranda of the Congress Hotel near Blakeslee's feet. The Pichacho Kid leaned against the front wall of the building, legs crossed, arms folded, smoking a cigarette. There was a half-sneer on his lips as he gazed at Slim Atwell's body lying face down in the dust of the street.

"Sun ain't botherin' him none!" he said.

The curious, the morbid, the indifferent, among the inhabitants of the town had been drawn to the street in front of the Congress by the shooting, had passed, or had stood beside Atwell's body. None had touched it.

The Pichacho Kid blew a whiff of smoke from his cigarette and watched it sail under the low, wide eaves of the veranda and out into the white sunlight. He glanced at Blakeslee, his eyes quizzical.

"Tennessee—"

"Damn Tennessee!" interrupted Blakeslee.

"Hmmm!"

Blakeslee glared into the desert haze, northwestward. One could never tell. The desert was always full of whirlwinds. They'd rise here and there, to spin like tops as they danced away. Yet Blakeslee had been almost certain that the dust he had seen half an hour ago had not been caused by a whirlwind. And the stage was not due.

The sanitation squad—the chain gang—suddenly appeared, a Mexican, armed with a shotgun, commanding them. They approached Atwell's body and turned it over.

"Greengo," said the Mexican guard. He stared hard. "Sleem Atwell!"

He barked out an order in his native tongue and the sanitation squad lifted the dead man and carried him away, down between the adobe buildings, out of sight.

"Are you seein' what I'm seein'?" asked Blakeslee, staring northwestward into the sunlight.

"Rider?" announced the Kid.

Blakeslee seemed relieved. "I've been seein' him for a right smart while. Thought he was a whirlwind."

"He's fannin' it," commented the Pichacho Kid.

THE men became silent, watching the vast country beyond the Santa Cruz. Far away, a thin line of dust trailed away with the slight breeze. At the head of the line of dust was a black blot, which rapidly approached town.

"He's a damned fool to be crowdin' a hoss in this heat," declared Blakeslee.

"Nobody's chasin' him either," added the Kid.

They watched the rider as he swung wide around the base of a hill, their eyes squinting against the sun in an effort to identify him.

"Looks familiar," said Blakeslee.

Critically, intently, they watched as the rider struck the broad level stretch of land close to the Santa Cruz. He was not riding recklessly, but with speed that indicated he was in a hurry.

Then, when the horse and rider thundered through the shallow bed of the Santa Cruz both the Pichacho Kid and Blakeslee recognized him. "Tennessee!" they exclaimed in unison.

Saying nothing, they watched Tennessee ride straight to the stage station.

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Peering intently at him, leaning forward the better to watch him, they saw him slide out of the saddle and walk rapidly into the station. An instant later he reappeared and began to unsaddle the horse he had ridden. Eggleston, the agent, emerged from the station enclosure, leading another horse. The saddle was transferred; the fresh horse was bridled; the cinches drawn tight; and Tennessee leaped into the saddle and rode southeastward, into the desert, toward Benson. In an instant he had vanished beyond the building.

Blakeslee stared hard at the Pichacho Kid, and the Kid stared back.

"What's bitin' him?" asked Blakeslee.

The Pichacho Kid blew another whiff of smoke at the ceiling. He shook his head. "It ain't like Tennessee to push a hoss like that for nothin'," he said. "Stage trouble, I guess."

During the night Blakeslee speculated fitfully over the incident, and after breakfast he went to the stage station to interrogate Eggleston.

"That was Tennessee who rode through here yesterday afternoon, wasn't it?"

"Yep."

"Changed hosses?"

"Yep."

"Burnin' leather, wasn't he?"

"Yep."

"Somethin' wrong?"

"Nope."

"You're a tight-lipped jasper," sneered Blakeslee. "Didn't Tennessee say anythin'?"

"Yes. He asked me for a pack of smokin' tobaccy."

"That all?"

"Yep."

"Where'd Tennessee come from?"

"West."

"Where's he headin'?"

"East."

Blakeslee stood over Eggleston and glared down at him.

"Bah!" he exclaimed. "If he'd told you where he was goin' you wouldn't have sense enough to remember it."

"The stage company ain't payin' me to answer fool questions, Blakeslee," said Eggleston. "And where Tennessee's goin' ain't none of your business. What he's doin' ain't none of your business, neither. 'Twould have served you right if them Tonto Apaches had lifted your skelp, you derned ouery critter."

Eggleston was a slight man, but he was now rigid with rage, and his graying mustache was bristling.

"You're just one of them wall-eyed galoots which goes around openin' your mouth and askin' questions!" he yelled as Blakeslee walked away. "If you had any whiskers on your face you'd have some sense!"

BLAKESLEE had knowledge of Eggleston's vitriolic temper, and he was aware of the broad license that the station agent's position gave him. Hence he walked away, grinning contemptuously. But later in the day, when he saw Dean Pritchard riding into town from the south, accompanied by a dozen of his riders, he straightened and stared while a sudden knowledge overwhelmed him.

"Hell and blazes!" he cursed. "Shore, I know now! Anne Pritchard's comin' home, and Pritchard's headin' east to meet her. Tennessee's got wind of it and has lit out ahead."

Pritchard and his riders were heavily armed. They rode good horses. Blakeslee could see that they were picked men—fighters. Each rider carried two rifles in saddle slings, and two

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heavy six-shooters. Belts and bandoliers of cartridges were strapped upon them.

They spent the night at the Congress Hotel, and in the barroom Blakeslee found Pritchard willing to talk.

"Shore. We're headin' fer the San Simon to meet Anne's stage," he said. "I figure the guard I sent with her will come back with her, and they'll be enough of 'em to keep her safe from El Paso to the San Simon. I am to meet her on the other side of Apache Pass and come through with her. Thet Army lieutenant at Fort Bowie has started things up, and I ain't takin' no chances."

"When's Anne comin'?" asked Blakeslee.

"She's leavin' El Paso day after tomorrow. The stage is due in the San Simon on the fourth day after that. I aim to be there by that time."

Blakeslee laughed.

"What's eatin' you?" asked Pritchard.

"Wal, it's shore odd," laughed Blakeslee. "Here I've been hangin' around town for several weeks, figurin' on tryin' to make up my mind to make a little pasear to Deming. Only this mornin' I decided that I was headin' east to-morrow—me and my boys. I'd shore be glad of the chance to ride along with you."

"Whar's your men?" asked Pritchard.

Blakeslee turned his head and looked through the front doorway, straight into the eyes of the Pichacho Kid, who stood in the shadows beyond the flickering candle light, watching and listening.

"I sent the Pichacho Kid after 'em, more than an hour ago, Pritchard. I told him to have the boys here at daylight or I'd bust him wide open!"

He scowled at the silent Pichacho Kid. The latter flashed a broad grin at him, and vanished into the darkness. Half a minute or so later there was a clatter of hoofs outside.

Blakeslee grinned. "I'll bet the Pichacho Kid makes good," he said.

At dawn, Blakeslee awakened and stared out of a window. He felt of his wounded shoulder, grimaced a little, got out of bed, dressed himself and went downstairs, passing through the barroom and outside to the veranda. There, tied to the hitch rail in front of the hotel, were the horses of the Smoothface outfit. They were foam-flecked but undaunted.

And lying in grotesque positions upon the floor of the veranda, wrapped in their blankets like huge cocoons, sound asleep, were the members of the Smoothface band. The Pichacho Kid was with them, and he awakened, grinning, at the feel of Blakeslee's boot.

An hour later, trailing Dean Pritchard and his Indian fighters, Blakeslee and his Smoothfaces rode eastward away from the Santa Cruz and into the blazing heat of the San Pedro Valley.

CHAPTER XXX.

PROPOSAL.

AS several of Anne Pritchard's friends had anticipated, certain members of the Army in El Paso had betrayed a lively interest in her. But the Army had not been victorious over Anne, nor had it won even one engagement. The eligible officers had done their best to win her by strategy and cajolery and flattery and praise, but even the best-looking lieutenant of them all, Barry Fallon, had failed.

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Moreover, Lieutenant Fallon knew why he had failed. Anne had told him. Also, she had delayed her departure from El Paso for three days, to make sure that the lieutenant would not misunderstand her; and Fallon, perhaps a bit crestfallen, but courageous as always, very polite, but looking rather pale, assisted her into the stage. He even helped to store her boxes inside, then stood in the doorway, rigid as a game cock, doffed his hat, and bowed to her.

"*Adios,* Miss Pritchard! I'm sure you will forgive me this: no matter how good the man who gets you, he will not deserve such a blessing!"

A stout woman of middle age who occupied part of the front seat in the coach gave Anne a glance of cold disapprobation, which Anne pretended not to see. She merely smiled at Lieutenant Fallon, who quietly closed the stage coach door and stepped back, his head still uncovered as he watched the stage coach whirl away.

Anne closed her eyes and leaned back comfortably. She had not yet met the gaze of the lady who disapproved of her. She wasn't even thinking of the woman; her thoughts were on the previous night. Last night she had spoken very plainly to Lieutenant Fallon. He *was* handsome—and, to do him justice, he pretended not to be aware of the fact. Yet certain of his mannerisms had created in Anne a feeling of antagonism which had made itself quite visible in the Army officer. She did not want any man to think that she could be attracted by mere male comeliness.

It was because she wanted to make sure that Lieutenant Fallon understood all this that she had missed the stage she had intended to take.

"You're leaving on the twenty-first," Lieutenant Fallon had said to her, during a dance at the barracks. "It must be lonesome for you, 'way out there in Arizona."

"I love Arizona," she said quietly.

"But, good Lord, you can't! You're a beautiful, vital girl. Why, since you've been here you've appeared to enjoy every hour. You've been the life of every party and dance. You've shown that you love pleasure and gayety and society—although this isn't the sort of society that you are entitled to. If you go back there you'll probably marry some Arizona bumpkin who will make a slave of you.

"Now listen, Miss Pritchard—Anne—Colonel Lawson tells me that my captain's commission will arrive on the twenty-third." His voice was now earnest, but slightly authoritative. "I want you to stay until my commission arrives, and then I'll have something to say to you. I'm sure to be transferred; I've been pulling wires for it, you know, using my influence and the influence of certain officers in the War Department. And I'm sure to be stationed somewhere in the east.—Anne, the position of the wife of a captain in the Army has its advantages. You'll see things and do things, as the wife of a captain, that you could not see and do as the wife of the kind of a man you're sure to marry if you stay in Arizona."

ANNE was thinking of Tennessee all this time; of Tennessee riding his big, gray horse. Thinking of him as she had seen him the first time, when she had been sitting on the seat of the Pritchard wagon, her father beside her as the stage guard rode in; of him as he stood in the doorway of the stage coach in the San Simon Valley, looking at her, his eyes glowing with amazement and happiness; of his

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kisses; of her last look at him as he rode off toward the mountains.

She looked straight into Lieutenant Fallon's eyes, as they swayed to the music of the waltz; and the lieutenant should have been warned by the cold, steady, enigmatic light in her eyes. She felt that Fallon had offered a personal insult to Tennessee, and she was furious.

She had faced the Apache marauders at the Pritchard ranch on the day they had killed Tony, but her courage upon that day, and her determination, had been no more intense than now. "I shall be here when your commission comes, Lieutenant Fallon," she said, smiling straight at him. "I shall leave on the twenty-fourth instead of the twenty-first, merely to hear what you have to say."

And so she had stayed. And now, with her eyes closed and her memory reënacting a scene of the previous night, she repeated what she had told the lieutenant when he, his captain's commission now in his possession, had proposed to her.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant Fallon. I'm sorry for you. I feel that I could never be as lonesome in Arizona as I would be if I were your wife. Lieutenant Fallon, the next time you ask a girl to marry you, don't forget that perhaps she *loves* her own people and her own country."

That was all, but it was sufficient. The clear, cold steadiness of her eyes had revealed to Fallon the depth of her feelings, her intense earnestness, her loyalty.

"I've been a fool, of course," he confessed, at last, and contrived to smile at her. "It's another man, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"He's a man, too," he said, looking at her, observing how her eyes had lighted. Then he added, regretfully, "I can see that. He would have to be a man to win you!"

NOW, leaning back in the stage coach with her eyes closed, she rolled along over the vast levels, the undulating hills and through the prickly pear and the wild, chaparral growth of the lowlands.

Morality, in the shape of the middle-aged lady on the front seat, became articulate.

"The hussy!" she exclaimed in a sibilant whisper. "Flirting with a soldier!"

No soldier, officer or private, would ever flirt with Morality. Perhaps that was why her rebuke carried no sting to Anne.

The monotonous landscape rolled by; the driver laughed aloud several times, while carrying on a profane conversation with a companion on the box, and Morality again expressed certain convictions to the effect that the driver's vocabulary was "shocking."

"I wouldn't let those things bother me too much, Maizie, if I were you," gently consoled the tall, slender, gray-mustached man who evidently had capitulated to the amazon beside him so many years ago that there no longer lingered in his heart any hope of freedom. "It's just the way these folks have.—This isn't Boston, you know, and I cal'late we'll have to put up with lots of things we don't like."

Stage stations appeared in the endless waste. Horses were changed. New drivers took the places of old. On again into the rolling wilderness, the stage creaking, the wheels crunching; into the setting sun and an ever-growing desolation.

Anne slept, but during her waking

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moments she was careful to avoid looking at Morality and her consort, lest they remind her of that society to which Lieutenant Fallon had promised to introduce her. She had liked El Paso—the El Paso Del Norte of the Mexicans—the North Pass through which they entered the United States of America.

During her stay at Aunt Millie's, Anne had sat many times looking through a real glass window across the Rio Grande into Mexico. Juarez with its mud huts, nestling behind the high hill that rose from the sandy banks of the river; far away into the mountains beyond.

On the one hand, she discerned an analogy between Mexico and the United States and herself and Lieutenant Fallon on the other. Perhaps the one would never understand the other. But there was Arizona to be thought of—Arizona and Tennessee.

And so, while the dusk stole on and Morality stared belligerently, Anne went to sleep again, to dream of Tennessee and the dry, dry bed of the old Santa Cruz, where there was romance and—Apaches.

CHAPTER XXXI.

POSTPONED.

AT Casa Grande, the driver of the westbound stage had delivered a letter to Tennessee. Tennessee had not even heard the driver's comment, upon passing over the epistle. Leaning against the adobe wall of the Casa Grande stage station, his cheeks and neck stained red under their bronze, Tennessee was oblivious to everything except the now familiar handwriting.

"Mr. Robert Randall," the address ran: "To be delivered to him wherever found."

He tried to be deliberate, as he drew his clasp knife from a pocket and pushed the blade through the envelope; but he knew that the emotion that welled up inside of him was a combination of excitement, delight and nervous anticipation. The driver of the stage, the passengers who had alighted, the station agent, and a few inhabitants of Casa Grande, smiled sympathetically at the tall young giant who was propped against the station wall, reading a letter which caused blushes to stain his cheeks. But these onlookers knew nothing of the quick determination that had seized Tennessee. An instant after reading the letter he was talking with the station agent.

"Jim," he said, "I'm hittin' the breeze for El Paso. It's important."

"That's what I thought," said the agent. "So she's writin' you regular, now?"

"Don't," said Tennessee, quietly.

"Of course not," apologized the agent. "I didn't know it was that serious. So you're goin' right on to her, eh?—Wal, the east stage won't be along until to-morrow."

"I'm ridin'."

"Sho!—Wal, now, if a letter does that to you, what will seein' her do to you?"

He grinned at Tennessee's back, for Tennessee was moving with long strides toward his horse. The agent turned to speak to the stage driver, and when he looked back a moment later nothing was left of Tennessee but a dust cloud, far down the trail. The driver and the agent grinned.

Blakeslee and the Pichacho Kid had caught a glimpse of Tennessee at Tucson, where he exchanged horses. Then a dust cloud had enveloped him.

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The desert closed in behind him, widening between him and town as the horse under him swung with long, smooth, easy strides toward a pass in the mountains to the eastward. Before midnight he was sleeping soundly upon a bunk in the Benson stage station; and at dawn, after again changing horses, he was riding across the San Pedro and was heading toward Dragoon Springs.

THERE was no need for Tennessee to hurry. Anne had written that she would leave El Paso on the twenty-first, and this was the nineteenth.—To-day, to-morrow and the day after. That was when she would leave El Paso. More than three days would be required for the stage to bring her to the point where he had left her in the San Simon; and by to-morrow night he himself would be in Bowie. That would give him two days in the San Simon and out of it, toward Deming. Somewhere along there he would meet her; and of course the faster he traveled the longer he would be with her on the return trip.

So, although he tried his best to curb his impatience, something of his eagerness must have been communicated to the various horses which he rode, for all were in the mood to run. And he exulted in this, considering it a good omen. So although he traveled fast, changing horses at each stage station, sleeping little, full of eagerness and a strange, new exhilaration, on the morning of the second day after leaving Tucson he had passed the old Cochise stronghold near the bases of the Dragoon Mountains, and was heading over the sandy waste of the Sulphur Springs Valley, toward Wilcox.

He saw no Indians, yet he observed various hoof tracks which told him that Indians had recently been in the vicinity. Beyond Wilcox, with Fort Bowie and Apache Pass ahead of him, he was puzzled by various hoof tracks that led in from different directions, seeming to have converged toward a common center.

He halted his horse and sat in the saddle, examining the hoof tracks, his brow thoughtfully furrowed.—Ponies. Wild mustangs of the plains. Small hoof prints of unshod ponies. Several larger hoof prints, the fore hoofs, shod.

The question was, had these horses been ridden by white men?

He straightened in the saddle and gazed at a cluster of hoof tracks leading across to the foot hills of the Dos Cabezoz. He shook his head. His lips tightened. He was thinking of Lieutenant Cabot.

"The fool!" was his thought.

Much as he disliked Lieutenant Cabot, he meant to question him regarding the movement of the Apaches in the vicinity.

HE rode into Fort Bowie at dusk, turned his horse into the station enclosure, and ten minutes later, dust-covered and saddle-weary, he was talking with Lieutenant Cabot.

"Back again, eh?" Cabot greeted him. "Looking for trouble? Well, everything's quiet. I guess that damned Cochise and his red devils won't give us any more trouble for a while! I've shown them that they can't monkey with the United States Army!"

"You've had no trouble, then," said Tennessee.

"Oh, a brush now and then. Nothing important."

"I hear they got Noonan, over in the Dragoons."

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"Oh, that!" Cabot laughed. "Noonan was always too fresh. I'd heard about a war party, over in the Dragoons, and I sent a detail to clean them out. Trouble was that the Redskins got there before we did."

"That's a habit of the Apaches," dryly commented Tennessee. "Any trouble in the pass lately? Anything stirring?"

"Nothing. I don't believe there's an Apache within fifty miles of the pass."

Tennessee's face was grave. This man's fatuous complacency disgusted him, yet he restrained words that this officer of the United States Army might have interpreted as a civilian's insolence.

Tennessee slept in the stage station, disdaining any further conversation or association with Cabot.

The next morning at dawn he was in the great pass, riding with every sense alert, his thoughts dwelling upon the hoof tracks which he had seen in Sulphur Springs Valley.

It was Lieutenant Cabot's judgment that there were no Apaches within fifty miles, but it was Tennessee's conviction that within two days a big war party of Apaches had entered the Chiricahuas.

He saw no fires, no smoke signals, nothing to indicate the presence of Indians in the vicinity; yet he knew that the dark and silent cañons, the hidden valleys, the dense forests that covered some of the slopes, might at that moment conceal various bands of the red marauders ready to swoop down on an unsuspecting enemy.

Nothing happened.

The sun drenched the dark recesses of the pass before he was entirely out of it, and when at last he looked back the peace and glory of the morning almost convinced him that his suspicions had been without foundation.

Riding fast, he spent the night at Separ, and rode into Deming the next afternoon.

There, in anticipation of meeting Anne, he sought a hotel room where he might shave and dress in the best clothing he could find, hoping that his lady would still be interested in him.

He was out in the street when the stage rolled in at dawn the following morning, to find that Anne was not aboard.

He stared hard at the driver, and his disappointment must have been visible, for the jehu grinned broadly at him, and handed him a letter. Brazenly, not heeding the stares of the passengers and some citizens of Deming, Tennessee read that Anne had delayed her departure for three days. She would leave El Paso on the twenty-fourth.

Instantly he was oppressed with a mighty indecision. It was one day's ride from Deming to El Paso. He could make it.

But ought he to try? Would his appearance at El Paso embarrass Anne? Would she wish him to come there? He thought not. And then perhaps she would.

Deming wasn't an interesting town. He might manage to spend three dull days; he could use one of them to ride to the mines, nearby, or he might sit on the veranda of the hotel, or he might inspect certain Zuni villages in the valley of the Rio Grande.

But he had no desire to make these short rides in search of diversion; and so, forcing himself to patience, he spent three of the longest days of his life—waiting . . .

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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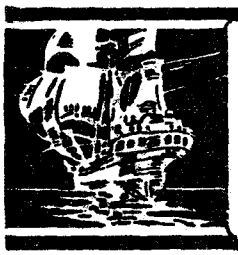

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ARGOSY pays $1 for each letter printed. Send your letter to "Argonotes" Editor, ARGOSY, 280 Broadway, N. Y. C.

RADIO recommendation:

Springfield, Mass.

Last night I happened to tune in on a national network which was dramatizing a serial written especially for the radio by T. S. Stribling, Pulitzer Prize winner, and you can imagine my surprise when I discovered that "Conflict," the radio serial, was none other than "Railroad," Stribling's novel-length story which ran through six issues of ARGOSY last summer. If you ask me, this is a pretty good recommendation for ARGOSY. What say?

PAUL BLOOM.

FISH story:

Springdale, Wash.

Here's the first "fish" story of the season—at least it happened on the opening day of the fishing season.

Mr. W. had been planning for this day for weeks—new boots, tackle, etc. Car all oiled, gassed. Very early start. Arrived at destination in record time—ARGOSY in front seat of car. But—fishing tackle? On the dining room table! And was he peeved—or was he?

MRS. C. MERKLIN.

WANTS a magazine full of stories like Detzer's:

JOHN J. MCELLIGOTT,
Fire Commissioner, N. Y. C.
Schofield Barracks, T. H.

Being a former fire chief in a small organization maintained by the government in the past, and being a believer in the education of the younger generation through means of the moving picture theaters and popular magazines, it has occurred to me that you might use your good offices toward the adoption of a magazine devoted exclusively to stories of fire department happenings, some true or based on fact and others with, of course, the proper technical backing, of the fiction kind.

In this connection your attention is called to a story that commenced in the April 7 issue of the ARGOSY by Karl Detzer which covers just the very thing I wish to see more general on the news-stands.

My principal motive behind this is the more general acquaintance of the general public with the utmost importance of efficient fire forces throughout our country.

LEON F. DENIS.

WANDERLUST:

Denver, Colo.

At the age of eleven, I expressed my intention of becoming a foreign missionary. It was the only way I knew of to get a free ticket to "foreign shores."

Well—I never did get to satisfy my wanderlust. For early, fate handcuffed me to responsibility which never let me go very far from home. It's people like me who appreciate ARGOSY. For every week an ARGOSY hero takes us with him for an adventure in some exciting new place. China, the Antarctic, the Caribbean, Hawaii—every conceivable place!

M. STONE.

SINCE the Spanish-American War:

Thayer, Mo.

Each Sunday morning when I get my copy of the ARGOSY, about the first thing I do is read "Argonotes." Seems that it is a hard matter to please all the readers, so don't try, just keep on the course you are now steering.

I first became acquainted with the good old ARGOSY while I was a member of the Second Alabama U. S. V. Infantry, in 1898, while stationed at Miami, Florida. One day my bunkie brought a copy to camp, and since that day I have missed very few copies.

Down here in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri, "The Land of a Million Smiles," we wish the ARGOSY many more years of pleasant sailing.

C. W. BLACK.

HOW'S it done?

Brooklyn, N. Y.

I can't see how you can print such a book as ARGOSY for the measly sum of one dime. My

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favorite authors are Erle Stanley Gardner, Fred MacIsaac and Max Brand.

If you continue to print such stories as "Brother of the Cheyennes" and "The Devil and the Deep" you will have a lifelong reader of ARGOSY.

EDWARD LAUK.

A SUN-BATH and a discovery:

Oil City, Pa.

I have been reading ARGOSY for five years, since the first time I found one lying in a pool of water and which I dried and read while sun-bathing.

I get a kick out of hearing some people condemn a story and in the next paragraph seeing some one praise it. We readers sure are a bundle of likes and dislikes.

SOL COEN.

MERRITT'S "Creep, Shadow!" starts thrilling and chilling you Sept. 8:

Toronto, Ontario.

I am writing this letter for only one reason. That reason is: where in blazes has A. Merritt got to? His last story was "Burn, Witch, Burn!" and that appeared as far back as October of 1932. Incidentally I think you, and all that host of Merritt fans who avidly await his reappearance with ill-concealed impatience, will agree with me that "Burn, Witch, Burn!" was undoubtedly the best story ever printed in ARGOSY. And, as one reader suggested in "Argonotes," it should by all means have a sequel. It ended too abruptly, left too many things unfinished. Oh, yes, that story could have gone on much farther. Why not have *Madame Mandilip* come back?

In addition to Merritt, I like the following writers, in order named: Packard, Kline, MacIsaac, Brand, Burroughs, Leinster, Bedford-Jones, Worts, Tuttle, Seltzer, Raine, McNary, Thompson, and all the others. Your "Stranger Than Fiction," by John S. Stuart, and "Women of Daring," by Stookie Allen, are fine fare.

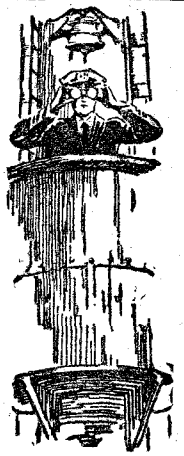
R. E. CLARRY.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

To come down to real facts, "Brother of the Cheyennes," by Brand, surely was a honey, not to mention "The Fatal Alarm," by Karl Detzer, and "The Devil and the Deep," by MacIsaac. What happened to Kline? I haven't seen him for some time.

I have been reading your sister book, DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY, and have found two very interesting characters, *Señor Lobo* and *Lester Leith*.

LEON H. STOLLOW.



Looking Ahead!

Too Much Duty

No matter how tough the man himself, the French Foreign Legion is a pretty tough way for him to climb up from the bottom. A novelette by

J. D. Newsom

Black Panther

Fifty savage jungle beasts at large!—An animal trainer's fiendish murder weapon.
A novelette by

Judson P. Philips

COMING TO YOU IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—SEPTEMBER 1

6A—25

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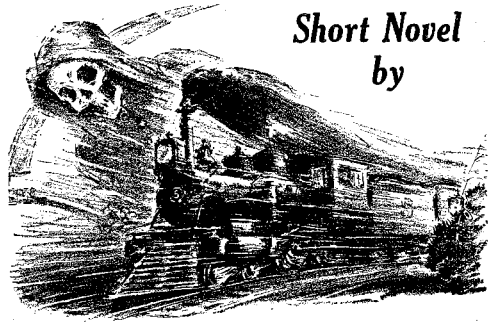
230 Grand in a Suitcase



Short Novel by

Allan Vaughan Elston

Thrilling Mystery of the Roaring Road . . . Menace and Excitement . . . Suspense-Packed Drama of Night in the Mojave Desert, with a surprise kick at the end . . . Complete in

SEPTEMBER

RAILROAD STORIES

Now on Sale . . . Ask Your News Dealer or Send 15c to 280 Broadway, N. Y. City (20c in Canada).

Also in September Issue: "Old Hell Bender," Complete Short Novel by E. S. Dellinger . . . "The Ashtabula Catastrophe," One of the Most Disastrous Wrecks in the Entire History of Railroading, Illustrated Feature by Earle Davis . . . Other Fact and Fiction Thrills.

ATLAS SUPER VALUES

This old reliable company is first choice with thousands of motorists who demand highest quality at lowest cost. Actual tests on roughest roads prove that standard brand tires reconstructed by the scientific Atlas process deliver 60 to 80% more service. **Order today, save money.**

FREE TUBE. Brand new guaranteed heavy duty circular molded tube made of finest heat-resisting red rubber **WITH EACH TWO TIRES** — or genuine Burgess lantern complete; throws 600 ft. beam; adjustable for spot-light or flood-light.

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.35	0.85
30x4.50-21	2.40	0.85
28x4.75-19	2.45	0.95
29x4.75-20	2.50	0.95
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
30x5.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.85

TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
7.00-20	5.95	2.95
7.50-20	6.95	3.75

REG. CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3	$2.25	$0.65
30x3½	2.35	0.75
31x4	2.95	0.85
32x4	2.95	0.85
33x4	2.95	0.85
32x4½	3.35	1.15
33x4½	3.45	1.15
34x4½	3.45	1.15
30x5	3.65	1.95
33x5	3.75	1.45

TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95
32x6—8-ply	6.95	2.75
32x6 10-ply	7.95	2.75
34x7	9.95	3.25
40x8	13.25	4.15

— All Other Sizes —
ALL TUBES NEW GUARANTEED

Send $1.00 Deposit with each tire ordered ($4.00 deposit on each truck tire). Balance C.O.D. If you send cash in full deduct 5%. Year's service guaranteed, or replacement at ½ price. **Order today.**

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THE MAN SHE LOVED TO HATE
Complete Novel by Mrs. Harry Pugh Smith

THE MEN IN HER LIFE
By RUBY M. AYRES
They were many in number, but only one of them counted

THREE-CORNERED HONEYMOON
By JANE LITTELL
Theirs was one honeymoon where three did not make a crowd

SHOW WINDOW ROMANCE
By ADRIENNE ESCOUSSE
They lived and made love in a plate-glass house

WIDOW-BY-LAW
By LOIS THOMPSON
It's hard lines to be a divorcee when your heart is still a wife's

Many other features in the August 25th issue of the popular magazine of love stories:

15c ALL-STORY 15c

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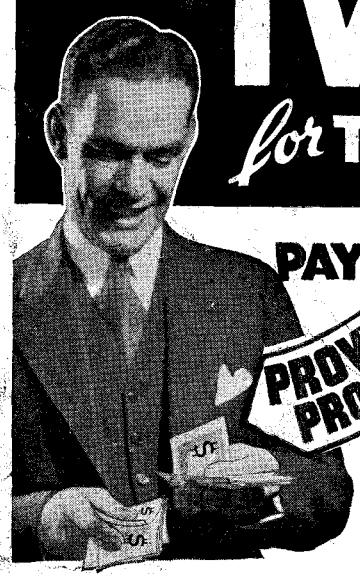
I WANT MEN for TEA and COFFEE ROUTES



PAYING UP TO $60.00 A WEEK

HERE'S a wonderful chance to start right in on your own route. Distribute bargain trial packages of nationally known food products. Several good openings for both men and women. If you are an honest, reliable person and willing to follow a few simple instructions I can offer you a bona fide chance to make up to $60.00 a week, with more if you make good.

HAVE A PERMANENT ROUTE WITH A BIG WEEKLY CASH INCOME

You simply take care of a regular route in your locality, making weekly calls on customers. Supply them with Tea, Coffee, Spices, Extracts, things they need to live—home necessities used daily. You handle the money and keep a big share of it for yourself. You get all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. I'll furnish you with hundreds of fine premiums and amazing special bargains to offer your customers with groceries and necessities.

START EARNING AT ONCE

My amazing new Tea and Coffee Route Plans provide for your making immediate cash earnings. If you need money to help pay your bills, buy necessities and live well, then you are just the person I am looking for. Start right in your own locality, right near where you live. The work is pleasant, the hours are short—there is no red tape in getting started. You won't have to rent a store, buy fixtures, or invest a lot of money.

I FURNISH EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I can hear from you I will send you complete details of the inside workings of this nation-wide Tea and Coffee Route Plan that is pouring big profits into the pockets of both men and women. I will explain everything about the business. The plans I give you cost me thousands upon thousands of dollars and have taken years of time to prepare. They are time-tried and proven. They have brought quick money relief to hundreds and thousands—why not you.

$103.32 IN A WEEK

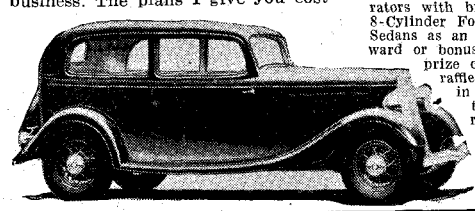
That's what Howard B. Ziegler, Pa., made. Hans Coordes, Nebr., made $27.95 in a day and $96.40 in a week. Albert Becker, Mich., made $40.00 in a day and as high as $100.00 in a week. If you have been working part time or for low wages, this is your opportunity to get more cash immediately. Ray Chapman, Mo., made $73.50 in a week. George W. Creed, Ohio, made $95.00 in a week. These exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of the offer I am making you now. Better send me your name today.

SEND NO MONEY—JUST NAME

I don't want your money—I need help. Rush me your name so I can lay all the facts before you, then you can decide for yourself. My plans are complete. I send them to you absolutely free. Don't expect me to wait indefinitely to hear from you. If you reply promptly it will be a strong thing in your favor with me. Write name on coupon or penny postcard. Costs nothing—act now.

FORD SEDANS GIVEN

I furnish my Route Operators with brand new 8-Cylinder Ford Tudor Sedans as an extra reward or bonus. Not a prize contest or raffle. Car is in addition to your regular big weekly cash earnings.



SPECIAL OPENINGS FOR WOMEN

I have glowing reports of the success women are having with neighborhood Tea and Coffee Routes. Even in their spare time they make up to $5.00 a day. The work is so light and pleasant. Mrs. Carrie McCalmant earned $50.00 in a week, despite a sick husband and two children to care for. I have hundreds of reports of exceptional earnings showing the amazing opportunity my plans offer.

YOUR OWN GROCERIES AT WHOLESALE PRICES

When I send you details of my new Tea and Coffee Route Plan I give you rock-bottom wholesale prices on your own groceries and household necessities. This is in addition to your regular daily cash earnings; so you make big money in cash and save big money on the things you use in your home.

TEA and COFFEE ROUTE COUPON

ALBERT MILLS, Route Mgr.
5165 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Here's my name. Rush me free particulars of your sensational Tea and Coffee Route Plan, showing just how I can get started earning up to $60.00 a week. This is without any obligation on my part.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

NRA CODE

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